RedFame

Studies in Media and Communication
Vol. 14, No. 4; December 2026
ISSN: 2325-8071 E-ISSN: 2325-808X
Published by Redfame Publishing
URL: http://smc.redfame.com

Digital Communication and Information Credibility: How Online Content Shapes Public Perception

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Received: August 3, 2026 Accepted: September 30, 2026 Online Published: October 18, 2026

doi:10.11114/smc.v14i4.9421 URL: https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v14i4.9421

Abstract

In this study, the perceived credibility in the digital environment is explored by analyzing the characteristics of online content using a cross-sectional survey of 489 adult internet users. It draws on the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and the Media Literacy Framework to examine the impact of source verification, engagement indicators, content format, platform context, and digital media literacy on judgments of credibility. Four experimental vignette conditions and two structured questionnaires were used to gather data, with a 2 × 2 factorial design. Regression, t-test, and ANOVA results indicate that verified sources significantly increase perceived credibility ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$), as do engagement cues like likes and shares, albeit to a lesser extent. Digital media literacy negatively moderates the relationship between engagement metrics and credibility ($\beta = -.147$, $p < .001$), such that more media-literate users rely less on these cues. The final model accounts for 46% of the variance in perceptions of credibility ($R^2 = 0.46$). The results underline the joint role of platform design and user competencies in information evaluation. The study helps to understand the formation of digital credibility and provides insights for media literacy and countering misinformation.

Keywords: information credibility, digital communication, media literacy, social media, source credibility, online information, misinformation

1. Introduction

The digital communication environment has substantially changed the ways of producing, disseminating and consuming information (Mironova, 2026). Millions of people around the world get their information from social media platforms, online news sites, video-sharing services, and digital communities (Brantner et al., 2025). These platforms allow users to access information rapidly, see a variety of perspectives, and be a part of public discourse. Meanwhile, the digital information ecosystem is facing serious issues pertaining to information quality, misinformation, disinformation, and credibility assessment (Adewojo et al., 2025). Unlike traditional media systems, information does not necessarily pass through professional editorial processes, and virtually any user can create and share information with numerous users.

Users are therefore increasingly required to assess the credibility of information. The ability to distinguish credible information from misinformation or rumor is an important component of digital citizenship and information literacy. This issue has become particularly relevant with the growing volume of false messages about health, politics, climate change, and social topics (Danilyan et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024).

A wide range of factors has been found to influence people's assessment of internet information (Choi & Lee, 2026). These cues can be related to source characteristics, message quality, visual presentation, indicators of participation (likes, shares), as well as platform-specific features (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Metzger et al., 2010). Credibility judgments are often made under time pressure and with limited information, which means that people must rely on mental shortcuts rather than comprehensive verification. In this context, source characteristics are the initial cues to credibility. Source Credibility Theory proposes that message credibility and acceptance depend partly on perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill. In digital environments, this is reflected in the presence of structural cues such as verification badges, institutional affiliations, and professional profiles, which consistently evoke more trust than unverified sources (Liao et al., 2024).

In addition to its source identity, digital metrics, including shares, likes, and comments, have changed the nature of today's credibility judgments. Although these metrics cannot be used to validate or determine accuracy, audiences are increasingly using high visibility and peer engagement as indicators of social endorsement, validity, and relevance. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) can be used to explain the increasing role of engagement measures (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The model distinguishes two ways of processing persuasive information: a central route and a peripheral route. Peripheral processing relies on cues without extensive consideration of message content or supporting evidence; in contrast, central processing involves careful examination of both. Peripheral cues can become important in digital environments characterized by information overload and limited attention. However, users do not respond equally to credibility cues; differences in digital competence and media literacy can affect information assessment. Media literacy is the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking that enable someone to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media communication (Potter, 2004). Media-literate individuals are likely to be better able to detect misinformation, recognize persuasive techniques, and evaluate media sources. As a result, media literacy can help people to be less dependent on superficial credibility cues and adopt more systematic evaluation processes (Cho & Woo, 2025).

Credibility-assessment research is increasingly attentive to cultural variation and platform-specific characteristics. There are differences in content, algorithms, and engagement patterns among platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. These differences correspond to distinct uses and gratifications and may shape information exposure and credibility criteria (Chen et al., 2026).

Platforms may also attract user groups with different demographic profiles, motivations, and levels of digital media literacy; these audience differences can shape which credibility cues users notice and how heavily they weight them (Chen et al., 2026; Si et al., 2026).

Although individual aspects of online credibility have been studied extensively, three important gaps remain. First, source credibility and engagement metrics are seldom examined together (Vilella et al., 2022). Second, media literacy is often neglected (Danilyan et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2024). Third, systematic, theory-based comparisons across digital platforms remain limited. This is important as misinformation is becoming more sophisticated. Thus, this study proposes an integrated model of online credibility evaluation based on the Source Credibility Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Media Literacy Framework. The study examines direct and moderating relationships in credibility judgments in different digital environments, using a quasi-experimental vignette design with survey data from 489 participants. In particular, this study seeks to determine the characteristics of the content that most strongly influence perceptions of credibility, analyze the moderating effect of digital media literacy, and investigate the possible differences in credibility assessment processes on the major digital platforms. The study is part of the emerging literature on digital communication, media literacy, and information credibility, and offers practical implications for educators, policymakers, platform designers, and communication professionals who want to encourage informed and critical consumption of online information.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Credibility in Digital Media Environments

Majerczak and Strzelecki (2022) argued that information credibility had long been recognized as a central concept in communication research because it influenced information acceptance, attitude formation, and behavioral responses. Traditionally, credibility had been conceptualized as the extent to which information is perceived as trustworthy, accurate, and reliable. However, the rise of digital communication platforms has fundamentally altered the processes through which individuals evaluate information credibility. Whereas traditional media content was typically produced by identifiable professional institutions, digital platforms enable virtually anyone to create, distribute, and amplify content (Wang et al., 2025). Consequently, users increasingly rely on various cognitive shortcuts and contextual cues when assessing information quality.

Farid et al. (2025) characterized digital information environments by information abundance, algorithmic dissemination, and varying levels of source transparency. These features often make direct verification difficult and increase uncertainty. Eissa (2025) indicated that trust in and the credibility of online content may reflect a combination of factors such as the source characteristics, message quality, visual presentation, social endorsement cues and individual user characteristics. The current focus on misinformation, disinformation and 'fake news' has heightened academic interest in trust and distrust in processes of assessment of credibility.

2.2 Source Effects and Source Verification

Source Credibility Theory proposes that individuals evaluate information partly through assessments of source trustworthiness, expertise, and goodwill (Hovland et al., 1953). When users perceive a source as knowledgeable and

trustworthy, they are more likely to accept the information being communicated. Dote Pardo (2026) noted that platform-based verification badges increasingly complement traditional verification tools by indicating that an account is legitimate and linked to a known person or public institution. These signals help users distinguish identifiable sources from anonymous creators. Shan (2016) similarly showed that known sources tend to receive higher credibility evaluations than anonymous sources. Nonetheless, the process of verification does not imply factuality, so questions remain about how users evaluate source legitimacy. Several studies examined source verification along with engagement metrics, media literacy, and platform-specific factors (Aldlimi et al., 2025). Lucaser and Acedera (2025) argued that individuals possessing stronger analytical and evaluative skills are better equipped to critically assess information quality and resist misleading content. Media-literate individuals are more likely to examine evidence quality, consider source credibility, and engage in reflective information processing before accepting online claims. While Smailov et al. (2025) have shown relationships between media literacy and the ability to detect misinformation, there is a lack of research on whether media literacy specifically acts as a moderating factor of the effect of engagement cues on credibility judgments.

2.3 Engagement Cues and Social Endorsement

Wuebben (2016) examined how social media platforms prominently feature engagement metrics like likes, shares, comments, reactions and view counts. These indicators offer visibility and popularity data about online content. Kim (2026) investigated these metrics as social-endorsement cues. Zingora et al. (2020) showed that peers' popularity can be perceived as an indication of informativeness. In some studies, such as Al-Mshashaqbeh (2025) and Avram et al. (2020), it was determined that engagement measures have positive correlations with perceived credibility. Shahbaznezhad et al. (2021) found that highly liked or shared content generates stronger engagement than comparable content with low engagement metrics. Keib and Wojdynski (2019) found that engagement cues can influence perceived credibility when other quality cues are unavailable. Other studies, including Xu et al. (2025), have examined popularity-based judgments.

2.4 Platform Differences in Credibility Assessment

Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and online news websites represent distinct communication environments. Facebook's focus is social networking and human interaction. YouTube combines informational, educational, and entertainment content in an audiovisual format. TikTok emphasizes short-form video and algorithmic discovery. Online news websites generally provide professionally produced information subject to editorial oversight. These distinctions are supported by research showing that platform design, content format, and user motivations vary across social-networking, audiovisual, short-video, and online-news environments (Brantner et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2026; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021; Si et al., 2026).

A few studies have indicated that users might use different standards of credibility when operating in these environments. The study by Si et al. (2026) looked at the factors that influenced the use of TikTok by university students using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis. They found multivariable statistical methods appropriate for examining complex associations among psychological, behavioral, and technological variables. The authors also presented their statistical results using formats common in the journal, such as standardized beta coefficients, coefficient of determination values, and Durbin-Watson statistics. Chan et al. (2026) explored the impact of self-disclosure behavior on peers among university students. The authors reported a correlation between online communication behaviors and social outcomes using survey data and regression analysis. Their conclusions are important in demonstrating the ongoing viability of quantitative surveys for the study of digital communication phenomena, and provide a useful precedent for the statistical reporting used in this study. Amankeldin et al. (2023) examined automated detection of fake social-media profiles, highlighting the importance of source authenticity in digital environments.

Most studies, however, focus on these factors separately and not in a comprehensive explanatory model. In addition, little research has focused on examining the moderation of engagement effects by media literacy across various digital platforms. Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by considering multiple factors, such as source verification, engagement volume, content format, platform context, media literacy, and skepticism, in the same model of online credibility assessment.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggested that people took in persuasive information via two different pathways. The central route is based on careful processing of the quality of the message and evidence presented, while the peripheral route is based on simple cues and heuristics. Information overload and time pressure are features of digital environments that require peripheral information, such as verification badges, popularity indicators

and presentation aspects. In the current research, it is hypothesized that if users are not cognitively engaged, engagement measures and source verification are peripheral cues that modulate credibility judgments. At the same time, people who are better equipped to employ media literacy skills should be more likely to utilize the central-route processing, thus being less susceptible to cues regarding engagement.

3.2 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory (Hovland et al., 1953) proposed that message acceptance is influenced by perceptions of source trustworthiness and expertise. People tend to believe information from credible sources more. Verification badges are a way of making source legitimacy and authenticity visible within digital environments. These signals can heighten perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness, which can lead to higher overall credibility ratings. Thus, it is expected that source verification will have a positive influence on perceived credibility.

3.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) suggested that people actively choose media to meet their information, social and entertainment needs. As users have multiple uses for multiple platforms, it may be necessary to have different criteria in different communication environments to determine credibility. Use of online news sites may involve a higher consideration of informational accuracy and source legitimacy, while users who access more interactive social media sites may have a higher need for social endorsement cues.

3.4 Media Literacy Framework

The Media Literacy Framework (Potter, 2004) emphasizes the importance of analytical, evaluative, and critical thinking skills in media consumption. Those with higher media literacy are better able to spot false information and the signs of popularity vs. information quality. As such, the link between engagement measures and credibility perceptions should be expected to be moderated by media literacy. The more media literate people become, the less significant the role of engagement cues (see Figure 1). This expectation is also consistent with meta-analytic evidence that media-literacy interventions improve the assessment of fake-news credibility (Lu et al., 2024).

The four perspectives serve distinct rather than interchangeable functions in the model: Source Credibility Theory explains the verified-source effect, ELM explains the use of engagement cues, the Media Literacy Framework explains the proposed moderation, and Uses and Gratifications Theory is retained only as a contextual account of platform selection and the cross-platform differences examined in RQ3. It is not treated as a direct theory of credibility.

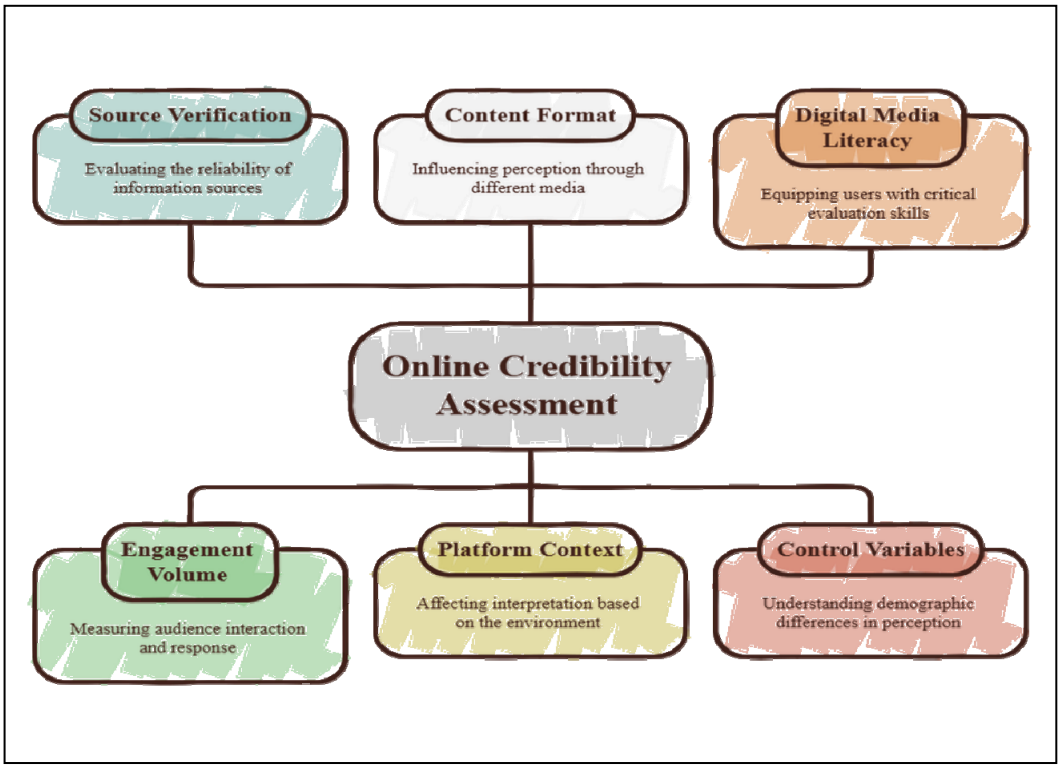

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Online Credibility Assessment

Source: Authors' own illustration.

3.5 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study is organized around the following related quantitative research questions:

RQ1: Which content and source characteristics most strongly predict perceived credibility in digital media environments?

RQ2: How do demographic characteristics and digital media literacy influence credibility judgments?

RQ3: Do credibility assessment mechanisms differ across Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and online news platforms?

The hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1: Content attributed to verified institutional sources will receive significantly higher credibility ratings than identical content attributed to unverified personal accounts.

H2: Digital media literacy will negatively moderate the relationship between engagement volume and perceived credibility, such that the influence of engagement metrics decreases as media literacy increases.

The analytical hierarchy is as follows: RQ1 is examined through the multivariable model and H1 tests its principal source-verification relationship; RQ2 is examined through the moderation model and H2 tests the engagement × media-literacy interaction; RQ3 is addressed through the platform-specific regressions and Fisher's z comparisons.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey with a randomized experimental vignette. Using standardized psychometric measurement and experimental vignette methodology, the design explored how characteristics of online content affect perceptions of credibility. A survey-based approach allowed data to be gathered from a relatively large and diverse sample of internet users, and both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of credibility assessment to be measured. The survey was designed using a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial vignette design. Participants were randomly allocated to one of four social media post scenarios in which the source was either verified or unverified and engagement was either high or low. All other content characteristics were the same across conditions, apart from these experimental manipulations.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

A final valid sample of 489 respondents was used in the study. The study was conducted in Kazakhstan, and all participants were adults (18–65 years) internet users residing in Kazakhstan who reported using at least one major social media platform weekly and consuming online news at least occasionally. The survey was administered in Kazakh. A purposive snowball sampling technique was used. The survey invitations were sent via social media, university mailing lists, online discussion boards, community organisations, and various other methods. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The inclusion criteria were that participants had to use a social network at least once a week, read online news at least occasionally, and give informed consent to participate.

An a priori power analysis was conducted in G*Power 3.1 using a small to medium effect size ($f^2 = .08$), $\alpha = .05$, and a .95 level of statistical power; the minimum required sample size was determined to be 271 participants. The final sample of 489 exceeded this requirement and provided statistical power greater than .99. Thus, although the study covers several platform contexts, the achieved sample exceeded the prespecified requirement for the planned quantitative analyses.

Of those who identified as male or female, 52.4% were women and 45.2% were men. 2.4% identified as non-binary or refused to say. The largest age group was 25–34 years (38.4%), followed by 18–24 years (31.7%), 35–44 years (18.8%), and 45–65 years (11.1%). About 67% of respondents had at least an undergraduate degree.

4.3 Instruments

Perceived Information Credibility Scale (PICS)

An adapted version of the Perceived Information Credibility Scale was used to measure perceived credibility. Fifteen items were used to assess three factors of credibility: Trustworthiness (5 items), Expertise (5 items) and Believability (5 items).

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree); higher scores indicated greater perceived credibility.

Digital Media Literacy Scale (DMLS)

A 12-item scale adapted from Lin et al. (2013) was used to assess digital media literacy. Four areas were measured: Access, Analysis, Evaluation, and Creation. The activities evaluated participants' skills in finding information,

identifying bias, evaluating the reliability of the sources, and recognizing manipulative communication strategies. Responses were averaged to create composite scores.

Online information skepticism was measured using five items assessing respondents' tendency to question information encountered online; higher scores indicated greater skepticism.

4.4 Experimental Vignettes

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four digital-information vignettes following a 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial design. The experimental manipulations included:

Source Type: Verified institutional source (1) versus unverified personal source (0)

Engagement Volume: High engagement (1) versus low engagement (0)

These manipulations produced four experimental conditions:

- Unverified source with low engagement
- Unverified source with high engagement
- Verified source with low engagement
- Verified source with high engagement

The wording, visual appearance, and message content were kept identical across all four vignettes, with only source verification status and engagement volume varying between conditions. Content format and platform context were measured separately through participants' survey responses and were included as explanatory variables in the regression analyses rather than as experimentally manipulated factors.

4.5 Variable Coding

For statistical analysis, variables were coded as follows:

- Verified Source: 1 = verified institutional source; 0 = unverified personal source
- Engagement Volume: 1 = high engagement; 0 = low engagement
- Content Format: 1 = multimedia/image-video; 0 = text-only
- Gender: 1 = male; 0 = female
- Platform Context: Dummy coded for regression analyses

Digital media literacy and skepticism were treated as continuous variables.

4.6 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected for four weeks from April 1, 2026 to April 28, 2026 using an online survey platform. Participants were first presented with an informed consent statement that described the purpose of the study, confidentiality considerations, voluntary participation requirements, and the length of time needed to complete the study.

Respondents completed media literacy scale items, credibility scale items, and the experimental vignette section after consenting to participate. Approximately 12–15 minutes were required to complete the survey. In addition, participants were exposed to the content of the vignette in either text-only or multimedia format and were coded as such. Participants were assigned to the four vignette conditions using simple randomization through the survey platform, resulting in approximately equal group sizes across conditions.

A manipulation check was conducted immediately after the vignette. Participants identified the source type (verified/unverified) and engagement level (high/low), confirming that the experimental manipulations were perceived as intended.

Data screening excluded incomplete submissions and responses exhibiting straight-lining patterns. No personally identifying information or IP addresses were collected. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw without penalty.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted according to recognized ethical standards for minimal-risk survey research. Participants were informed about the study purpose, confidentiality protections, anonymity, and their rights as research participants. The informed consent of all participants was obtained prior to participation. Because the study involved anonymous survey responses, no personally identifiable information was collected. Data were stored securely and analyzed in aggregated form only. Ethical review was waived under institutional guidelines because the study involved minimal risk, anonymous participation, and non-sensitive survey data.

4.8 Data Analysis

The data were summarized through descriptive statistics for participants' characteristics and study variables. Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Relationships among study variables were analyzed using Pearson correlation analysis.

Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to assess group differences. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to determine predictors of perceived credibility. To test the moderating effect of digital media literacy, an interaction term between the variables was used in the moderation analysis. Simple-slopes analyses were performed to explain significant interactions. Finally, platform-specific regression analyses and Fisher's z comparisons were used to investigate differences across digital communication platforms.

5. Results

5.1 Data Screening and Assumption Testing

All data were screened before hypothesis testing for missing values, normality, outliers, common method bias, multicollinearity, and autocorrelation. Missing values represented no more than 2.1% of observations and were imputed using mean substitution because the proportion was below 5%. Skewness and kurtosis results showed that the composite variables were normally distributed. Although the Shapiro-Wilk tests were statistically significant, skewness and kurtosis remained within the stated thresholds, supporting approximate normality in this relatively large sample. A total of seven multivariate outliers ($p < .001$) were identified using Mahalanobis distance analysis and eliminated before being subjected to further data analysis. After multivariate outlier screening, no cases had a z-score greater than ±3.29 by univariate outlier screening. Results from Harman's single-factor test indicated that there were no serious concerns about common method bias because the first factor explained 31.8% of the total variance. Additionally, anonymity, randomized vignette assignment, standardized instructions, and separation of questionnaire sections were used to minimize common method bias. There were no signs of problematic multicollinearity as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.12 to 2.41 and tolerance values were between 0.41 and 0.89. Durbin-Watson statistics were satisfactory.

Table 1. Data Screening and Diagnostic Tests

Variable / Test	Statistic	P-value	Skewness	Kurtosis
Normality Tests				
Perceived Credibility Score (PCS)	0.982	.001	-0.42	0.37
Trustworthiness	0.978	< .001	-0.51	0.42
Expertise	0.981	.002	-0.38	0.21
Believability	0.976	< .001	-0.46	0.58
Digital Media Literacy Score (DMLS)	0.985	.003	-0.88	1.26
Online Information Skepticism	0.987	.006	0.74	-0.91
Diagnostic Tests				
Missing Data (%)		2.1		
Cases Removed (Mahalanobis)		7		
Harman's Single Factor Variance (%)		31.8		
VIF Range		1.12–2.41		
Tolerance Range		0.41–0.89		
Durbin-Watson		1.874		

Note. All skewness values were below |2| and all kurtosis values were below |7|, satisfying recommended thresholds for normality. Shapiro-Wilk test was used for normality. P-values are reported as exact except where $p < .001$. VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. As shown in Table 2, the average perceived credibility score was moderate ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.72$), suggesting that respondents generally adopted a cautious but not highly skeptical approach toward online information. Digital media literacy scores were relatively high ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.61$), indicating moderate-to-strong confidence in participants' ability to evaluate digital information.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Major Study Variables (N = 489)

Variable	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Perceived Credibility Score (PCS)	3.41	0.72	1.31	4.96
Trustworthiness	3.48	0.79	1.20	5.00
Expertise	3.37	0.75	1.40	4.95
Believability	3.38	0.81	1.10	5.00
Digital Media Literacy Score (DMLS)	3.82	0.61	1.75	5.00
Online Information Skepticism	3.29	0.77	1.20	5.00
Engagement Cue Sensitivity	3.16	0.69	1.25	4.90
Daily Screen Time	2.87	0.91	1.00	4.00

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) except Daily Screen Time, which was measured on a 4-point scale (1 = less than 2 hours, 2 = 2–4 hours, 3 = 4–6 hours, 4 = more than 6 hours).

5.3 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for all scales and subscales in Table 3. All measures exceeded the recommended threshold of $\alpha \geq .70$, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics for Instruments and Subscales

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Trustworthiness	5	0.87
Expertise	5	0.84
Believability	5	0.86
Perceived Credibility Scale (PCS)	15	0.92
DMLS Access	3	0.82
DMLS Analysis	3	0.85
DMLS Evaluation	3	0.88
DMLS Creation	3	0.81
Digital Media Literacy Scale (DMLS)	12	0.89
Online Information Skepticism	5	0.81

Note. $\alpha \geq .70$ indicates acceptable reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

All instruments demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.81 to 0.92, indicating that the measurement instruments were reliable for subsequent analyses.

5.4 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents Pearson correlations examining bivariate relationships among the study variables.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. PCS	—							
2. Trustworthiness	.88***	—						
3. Expertise	.84***	0.72***	—					
4. Believability	0.86***	0.70***	0.69***	—				
5. DMLS	0.42***	0.36***	0.38***	0.35***	—			
6. Verified Source	0.49***	0.41***	0.39***	0.44***	0.12*	—		
7. Engagement Volume	0.28***	0.22***	0.19***	0.25***	-0.18***	0.01	—	
8. Skepticism	-0.35***	-0.31***	-0.28***	-0.33***	0.31***	-0.02	-0.11*	—

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The correlation between perceived credibility and digital media literacy was significant and positive, $r = 0.42$, $p < .001$. Verified source status showed the strongest positive correlation with credibility perceptions, $r = 0.49$, $p < .001$. In contrast, skepticism toward online information was negatively associated with perceived credibility, $r = -0.35$, $p < .001$. Engagement volume demonstrated a moderate positive association with credibility ratings, $r = 0.28$, $p < .001$.

5.5 Group Differences in Credibility Assessments

Table 5 reports an independent-samples t-test comparing credibility perceptions across verified and unverified source conditions; Table 6 reports one-way ANOVA results for platform and education-level differences.

Table 5. Independent Samples t-test for Source Verification

Comparison	Verified Source M (SD)	Unverified Source M (SD)	t	df	p-value	Cohen's d
Perceived Credibility Score	3.78 (0.63)	3.06 (0.68)	12.41	487	< .001	1.13

Note. Higher scores indicate greater perceived credibility.

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA Results for Platform and Education Differences

Analysis	F	df	p-value	Effect Size
Platform Differences	11.82	(3, 485)	< .001	$\eta^2 = .07$
Education Level Differences	4.19	(3, 485)	0.006	$\eta^2 = .03$

Note. Tukey HSD indicated that online news sites (M = 3.72, SD = 0.66) were rated significantly more credible than TikTok (M = 3.18, SD = 0.73, p < .001) and Facebook (M = 3.29, SD = 0.70, p = .004).

Participants exposed to verified institutional sources reported significantly higher credibility scores (M = 3.78, SD = 0.63) than participants exposed to unverified personal accounts (M = 3.06, SD = 0.68). The difference was statistically significant, t(487) = 12.41, p < .001, d = 1.13. These findings provide strong support for H1.

A one-way ANOVA examined differences in perceived credibility across platform contexts.

Results indicated significant differences among platforms, F(3, 485) = 11.82, p < .001, $\eta^2 = .07$. Tukey HSD comparisons revealed that online news sites (M = 3.72, SD = 0.66) received significantly higher credibility ratings than TikTok (M = 3.18, SD = 0.73, p < .001) and Facebook (M = 3.29, SD = 0.70, p = .004).

Credibility perceptions differed significantly across educational categories, F(3, 485) = 4.19, p = .006, $\eta^2 = .03$. Respondents possessing postgraduate and doctoral qualifications reported greater skepticism and lower reliance on engagement cues than respondents with secondary education.

5.6 Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 7. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Perceived Credibility

Predictor	B	SE	β	t-Stat	P-value	VIF	95% CI for B
Age	0.05	0.02	0.08	2.32	0.021	1.24	[0.01, 0.09]
Education	0.07	0.03	0.09	2.61	0.009	1.41	[0.01, 0.13]
Gender	-0.02	0.03	-0.02	-0.61	0.543	1.18	[-0.08, 0.04]
Screen Time	0.04	0.02	0.07	2.05	0.041	1.32	[0.00, 0.08]
Skepticism	-0.26	0.03	-0.290	-8.41	< .001	1.67	[-0.32, -0.20]
Verified Source	0.54	0.04	0.41	13.28	< .001	1.54	[0.46, 0.62]
Engagement Volume	0.19	0.04	0.150	4.91	< .001	1.44	[0.11, 0.27]
Content Format	0.12	0.03	0.10	3.74	< .001	1.29	[0.06, 0.18]
Platform Context	0.16	0.03	0.131	4.88	< .001	1.51	[0.10, 0.22]
Model Statistics							
Block 1							
R^2				0.18			
Adjusted R^2				0.17			
F(5, 483)		21.16				p < .001	
Block 2							
R^2				0.46			
Adjusted R^2				0.45			
F(9, 479)		45.34				p < .001	
Durbin-Watson				1.874			

To address RQ1, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to predict perceived credibility across two exploratory blocks. The baseline model (Block 1), which included demographic and initial behavioral controls, was statistically significant and accounted for 18% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.18$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.17$, F(5, 483) = 21.16, p < .001). The inclusion of the primary independent variables in the final model (Block 2) significantly improved the model's explanatory power. The final model explained 46% of the total variance in perceived credibility ($R^2 = 0.46$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.45$, F(9, 479) = 45.34, p < .001). Residual independence was confirmed by a satisfactory Durbin-Watson value of 1.874, and multicollinearity was ruled out as all Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) fell safely below 2.0 (maximum VIF = 1.67). Out of the nine predictors in the full model, most variables were statistically significant in explaining perceived credibility.

5.7 Moderation Analysis

Table 8. Moderation Analysis: Digital Media Literacy as Moderator

Predictor	B	SE	β	t-stat	p-value	95% CI for B
Engagement Volume (Centered)	0.21	0.04	0.176	5.13	< .001	[0.13, 0.29]
DMLS (Centered)	0.31	0.05	0.288	6.54	< .001	[0.21, 0.41]
Engagement × DMLS	-0.18	0.04	-0.147	-4.57	< .001	[-0.26, -0.10]
R^2	0.39					
F(3, 485)	103.47				p < .001	

The engagement volume × digital media literacy interaction was statistically significant (β = -0.147, p < .001) as shown in Table 8. A negative interaction coefficient indicates that the positive association between engagement volume and perceived credibility weakened as digital media literacy increased. Simple slope analysis based on unstandardized coefficients revealed that engagement volume was positively associated with credibility among respondents with low digital media literacy (B = 0.42, p < .001), showed a weaker positive association among respondents with average digital media literacy (B = 0.21, p < .001), and was not significantly associated with credibility among respondents with high digital media literacy (B = 0.05, p = 0.182). The results suggest that people with higher levels of media literacy placed less value on popularity cues to assess the credibility of information they found online, thus corroborating H2 (see Figure 2).

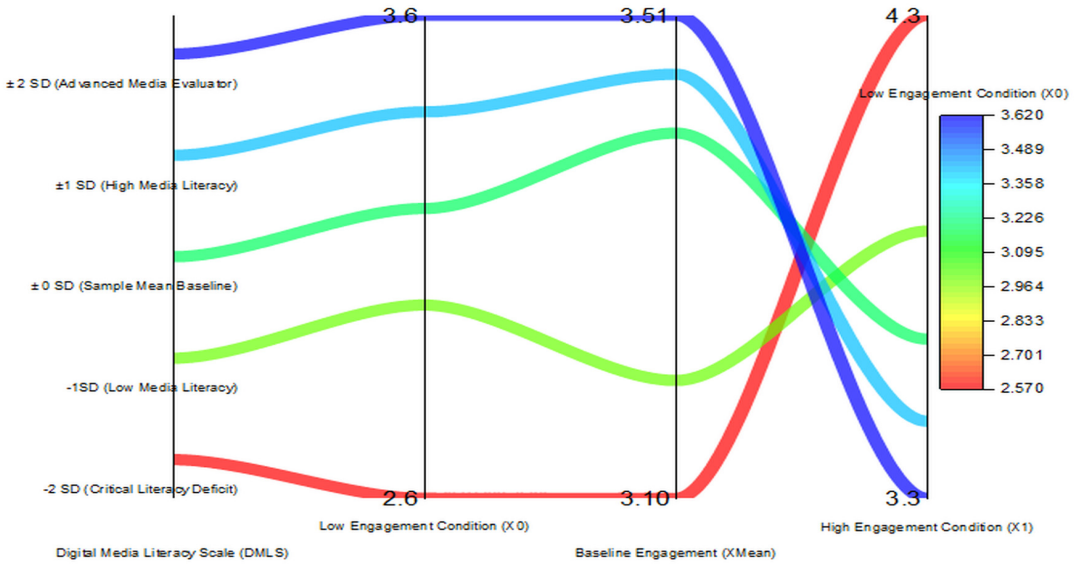

Figure 2. Two-Way Interaction of Engagement Volume and Digital Media Literacy on Perceived Credibility

Source: Authors' own construction.

5.8 Platform-Specific Credibility Mechanisms

Table 9. Platform-Specific Regression Results

Predictor	Facebook β	YouTube β	TikTok β	News Sites β
Verified Source	0.292***	0.384***	0.245***	0.419***
Engagement Volume	0.234***	-0.115*	0.310***	0.055
Skepticism	-0.185**	-0.211**	-0.145*	-0.324***
Media Literacy	0.162*	0.193**	0.121*	0.285***
Model R^2	0.390	0.436	0.412	0.487

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Unstandardized coefficients and their 95% confidence intervals are not reported for the platform-specific models; therefore, confidence intervals for standardized β coefficients are unavailable.

Table 9 indicates that for Facebook users, engagement volume was a relatively strong predictor of credibility (β = 0.234, p < .001). Among TikTok users, engagement metrics exerted the strongest influence (β = 0.310, p < .001). For YouTube users, source verification emerged as the dominant predictor (β = 0.384, p < .001), while among online news users, source verification and skepticism were the strongest determinants of credibility.

Table 10. Fisher's z Comparisons Across Platforms

Comparison	Z-Stat	P-value
TikTok vs News Sites	2.942	0.003
Facebook vs News Sites	2.115	0.035
TikTok vs YouTube	1.987	0.048
Facebook vs TikTok	1.215	0.226

Fisher's z comparisons in Table 10 indicated significant differences between TikTok and online news users in the relationship between engagement volume and credibility perceptions (z = 2.942, p = .003). These findings provide evidence that credibility assessment mechanisms differ significantly across digital platforms, thereby supporting RQ3. Figure 3 illustrates that credibility assessment is highly context-dependent, showing varying pathways across the four platforms.

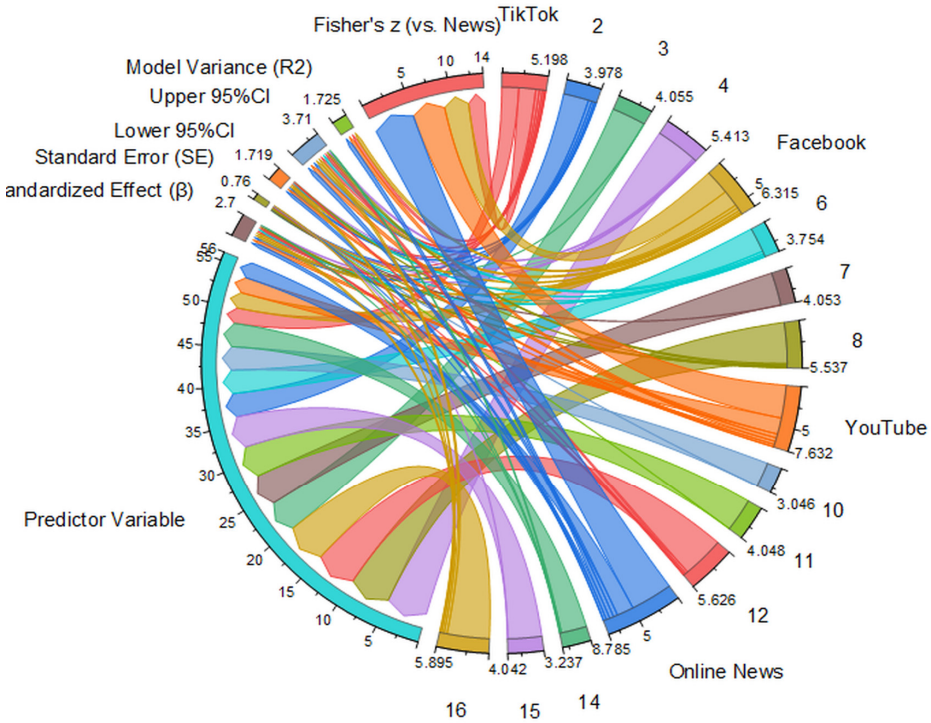

Figure 3. Regression Profiles and Cross-Platform Credibility Pathways

Source: Authors' own construction.

6. Discussion

The study investigated the relationship between source verification status, engagement metrics, content format, platform context, and digital media literacy and perceptions of information credibility in today's digital communication landscape. The study adopted the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Source Credibility Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) along with the Media Literacy Framework to describe the cognitive and contextual processes used by online users to assess information credibility. RQ1 aimed to find out what elements of the online content best predict credibility ratings. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis showed that source verification status was the strongest predictor of perceived credibility ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$), followed by online information skepticism ($\beta = -0.290$, $p < .001$), engagement volume ($\beta = 0.150$, $p < .001$), and platform context ($\beta = 0.130$, $p < .001$). The regression model as a whole accounted for 46% of the variance in perceived credibility, indicating substantial explanatory power. The results are consistent with Hovland et al. (1953) and Yuen et al. (2023). Content attributed to verified institutional sources was perceived as significantly more credible than content from non-verified personal sources. Verification badges may function as useful heuristic signals in information-rich digital environments where comprehensive checking is difficult. The results also align with Flanagin and Metzger (2007) and Metzger et al. (2010). Platform verification is a key symbol of authenticity and institutional legitimacy in the current digital environment. Moreover, engagement volume was significantly associated with credibility judgments, although this association was weaker than that observed for source verification. This suggests that, while likes, shares, and views convey social endorsement, popularity is not synonymous with structural legitimacy (Kairat et al., 2023). Content format was also significantly associated with credibility ratings, with multimedia content receiving higher credibility ratings than text-only content.

H1 predicted that content that came from verified institutional accounts would be viewed as more credible than content that came from unverified personal accounts. This hypothesis was supported by the independent-samples t-test.

RQ2 examined how demographic characteristics and digital media literacy influence credibility judgments, while H2 tested whether digital media literacy moderates the engagement–credibility relationship. The results of the moderation analysis indicated that the interaction between engagement volume and digital media literacy was significant ($\beta = -0.147$, $p < .001$). The moderation analysis also supported H2. Among respondents with high digital media literacy, engagement volume was not significantly associated with credibility judgments (Bondarenko et al., 2022; Guseva et al., 2022). The results are consistent with Potter's (2004) Media Literacy Framework that emphasizes analytical and evaluative skills in consuming media. The results also corroborate the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). ELM suggests that when information is processed through the central route, individuals evaluate arguments critically and rely less on peripheral information. The findings are consistent with the proposition that higher media literacy is associated with greater reliance on central-route processing and reduced reliance on heuristic cues such as likes, shares, views, and comments. In terms of demographic factors, age and education showed a slight positive correlation with credibility evaluations, whereas gender was not statistically significant.

RQ3 examined whether there were differences in the credibility perception mechanisms between Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and online news sites. Significant differences across platforms were observed, suggesting that credibility judgments vary across platform contexts. It was found that engagement metrics were the strongest predictor among TikTok users ($\beta = 0.310$, $p < .001$), while this relationship was not significant among online news users. Facebook users also exhibited relatively high sensitivity towards engagement cues, whereas YouTube users relied more strongly on source verification. The findings support Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that people choose media to satisfy particular information and social requirements.

This study is relevant in several respects to communication and media studies. First, four theoretical perspectives are integrated within a single explanatory framework. Previous studies have examined source credibility, media literacy, or engagement separately, whereas the present study demonstrates how these factors are jointly associated with perceived source credibility. Second, the study offers evidence of the greater weight of source verification relative to engagement-based popularity. This finding informs the debate about the relative importance of institutional authority and social validation in contemporary digital communication. Third, the study indicates that digital media literacy moderates the relationship between engagement-based cues and perceived credibility. Finally, the platform-specific analyses illustrate that credibility mechanisms differ across digital environments, pointing to the need to consider the technological context in research on information-evaluation processes.

The findings sharpen the academic distinction between popularity and credibility. The substantially larger coefficient for source verification than for engagement volume suggests that users do not treat all peripheral cues as equivalent: an accountable source identity carries more evidentiary weight than visible popularity. At the same time, the significant engagement effect shows that interface metrics are not merely background features; they become part of the perceived evidentiary environment in which a claim is judged. This helps explain why the same content can receive different credibility evaluations when its displayed social endorsement changes.

The moderation result also provides an explanation beyond simple confirmation of ELM. Higher media literacy appears to change the relative weighting of available cues, reducing reliance on popularity while preserving attention to source and message information. Platform differences should therefore be interpreted as a joint product of interface design and audience composition, rather than as fixed properties of the platforms alone. Because the sample was not designed to identify platform-specific user populations, this interpretation remains provisional and should be tested with larger probability samples.

The findings have practical implications for policymakers, educators, journalists and platform designers. Given the strong association between source verification and credibility, transparent verification systems may help users distinguish identifiable institutional sources from unverified accounts. Digital platforms should therefore continue developing clear verification features that distinguish verified institutional accounts from unverified accounts.

For content providers including journalists, public institutions, educators, health communicators, and independent creators—the practical implication is to make credibility assessable rather than merely visible. Posts should identify authors and institutional affiliations, link to underlying evidence, state uncertainty, and distinguish verified facts from opinion. High engagement should not be presented as proof of accuracy. These practices are especially important on short-form and socially oriented platforms, where users in this study were more responsive to popularity cues.

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, because of the cross-sectional design, no causal inferences can be drawn about long-term credibility formation. Second, using purposive snowball sampling reduces the generalizability of the sample beyond the sample itself. Third, although experimental vignettes provide control, they necessarily abstract

and simplify the information environments users will encounter in real life, where they must process and respond to multiple competing cues. Finally, the study was restricted to four platform categories, while emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence, synthetic media, and virtual environments were not included. Future studies should use longitudinal designs, probability sampling, and more complex experimental manipulations to overcome these limitations.

7. Conclusion

Discerning credible information has become increasingly important amid information overload, misinformation, and AI-generated content. This study examined 489 adult internet users and assessed how source verification, engagement indicators, content type, platform context, and digital media literacy shape credibility judgments. Source verification emerged as the strongest predictor: content attributed to verified institutional sources was consistently rated as more credible than identical content from unverified personal sources. Engagement metrics also influenced judgments, although less strongly than source legitimacy.

Digital media literacy moderated these effects. Participants with higher literacy were less likely to treat likes, shares, and views as indicators of information quality. Platform context also mattered: Facebook and TikTok users relied more on engagement cues, whereas online news users focused more on source legitimacy and content quality. By integrating several theoretical frameworks and combining survey data with experimental vignettes, the study highlights the need for stronger verification mechanisms, clearer platform policies, and improved media literacy education.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Author contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

This research was funded by the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Grant No. BR24993082).

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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