



Impact of Information Transparency and Content Credibility on Trust in Digital News Platforms: The Mediating Role of User Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between Chinese digital news platform trust and content credibility and information transparency with user engagement as a mediating variable and digital literacy as a moderating variable. The analysis is done using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) based on the data obtained after surveying 300 Chinese digital news consumers. According to the findings of the research, users have more confidence in news information that exhibits credibility and transparency characteristics. The credibility and transparency can be effective in the establishment of trust based on the level of user engagement since the digital literacy level improves their impact on the creation of trust. The research reinforces the theories of trust with digital journalism through not only offering a theoretical contribution but also valuable suggestions to the developers of platforms as well as the teaching and regulatory organizations that strive to produce credible digital news platforms. It is suggested to conduct future research in the environment of cultural and algorithm-based news.

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1. Introduction

The digital news platforms did a radically radical change on the way individuals obtain news material and the way they interact and evaluate news. Digital media systems guarantee improved rates of information sharing as well as personal news suggestions among people across the world and facilitate participation of the audience. China presents the most complex online news environment as its news environment is formed through a highly complex interaction between state regulation and technological breakthrough with the changing behavioral patterns of users. The platforms like Toutiao, Tencent News, Xinhua News App, and The Paper (Pengpai News) have grown their user base by using combination algorithms and mobile-first features like interactive functionality to address the dynamic needs of the modern Chinese digital news consumers (Newman et al., 2023; Zhang, Dumitrica, & Jansz, 2024). The Chinese digital news media is also unique because it is in an environment of digitalization and control of information. The Chinese government has laws and real-time monitoring of the platform content which means that it has tight control over the news media content of its news media. This does not only have a press freedom implication, but also has the implications related to the way audiences perceive news content and develop trust in news platforms (Chen, 2025; Fletcher et al., 2025). Despite this regulatory backdrop, one of the most flourishing digital media landscapes in the context of user engagement is found in China where 1.03 billion internet users were as of the end of 2023; the majority of them access news in terms of mobile applications and integration of platforms (Statista, 2024).

The news consumption patterns in China have been considerably transformed by the advancement in the artificial intelligence and big data. At present, news providers have an

opportunity to use algorithmic recommendation algorithms to tailor the news feed, and therefore, make it more engaging or fulfilling to the consumers (Du, 2024). Nevertheless, this personalization has come at the cost of having to deal with the issues of echo chambers, misinformation, and a curtailment of content diversity (Zhang, 2022). In this regard, this concern with civic trust in digital news platforms is highly important, and with the issues of information reliability, media partisanship, and algorithmic accountability rapidly rising (Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022). Advancements in artificial intelligence and big data have a significant impact on the evolution of news consumption patterns in China. Algorithms used to optimize news feeds on news platforms today are based on algorithmic recommendation algorithms, effectively enabling the news platforms to maximize consumer engagement and satisfaction (Du, 2024). Nonetheless, due to this personalization, echo chambers, disinformation, and content diversity loss have also become problematic (Eg, Demirkol Tønnesen, & Tennfjord, 2023). The general trust from the population in digital news sources is a significant concern in this instance as the number of concerns about the credibility of the information, media biases, and algorithm transparency increases (Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022). There are also many other factors depending on user engagement that highly influence trust. It comprises being involved with news content behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally, such as reading, sharing, commenting, and reacting (Brodie et al., 2011). With users being more engaged, users are likely to develop a deeper understanding or feeling as to the content and the platform, thus promoting trust (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Digital platforms in China have comment threads, real-time chat, reaction emojis, user rankings, and other features built in that create community-like environments, encouraging active participation (Hew et al., 2023).

Finally, another element to be mentioned here is digital literacy, meaning being able to use and evaluate digital information. However, digital literacy also influences the degree to which users judge the credibility of the content and the transparency and trustworthiness of the platform (Wineburg & McGrew, 2016). In addition, it moderates how users react to news engagement strategy and platform algorithms. In China, with digitalized expansion to different socio-economic regions, there is an uneven distribution of digital literacy, resulting in different interpretations and trustworthiness of news (Kanižaj, 2019). Higher digital literacy of users can provide an insight into where the users are more likely to be aware of misinformation, question the credibility of content, and reward transparent platforms, fostering the trust establishment and becoming an important moderator to the trust establishment process. While there is a growing body of literature examining the antecedents of media trust across the globe, there is a gap in context-specific studies on digital news platforms in China. The bulk of previous studies tend towards either noticing Western liberal media systems or studying political trust or general media skepticism in particular (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003). Given the sociopolitical singularity of China's media environment and China's evolving digital infrastructure, it is therefore necessary to unpack how platform-level features regarding content credibility, information transparency, and user engagement can predict trust and how this process is mediated by digital literacy.

Given this gap, the present study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the effects of content credibility and information transparency on trust in Chinese digital news platforms, with user engagement as a mediating variable and digital literacy as a moderator. Concerning research objectives, the study specifically aims at: (1) exploration of the direct impact of content credibility and information transparency on user trust towards digital news platform; (2) understanding of the mediating effect of user engagement in these associations; and (3) analysis of how digital literacy exerts influencing impact on these relationships. The study contributes to the knowledge of trust dynamics within China's digital media ecosystem by the development and empirical testing of an integrated model of these constructs. This is a significant study due to a number of reasons. To begin with, it offers a theoretically grounded and empirically tested model which links platform properties with user-level trust results. Second, China is researched, which has the most internet users and has an ambivalent media system where the state regulation intersect with the market logic. Second, the presented study can inform the developers of platforms, media regulators, and journalism practitioners about what design and governance properties would be most likely to increase or decrease user trust. Indicatively, in the event that transparency is revealed to increase trust only among digital literate users, then there should be concerted effort to ensure that users are themselves more media literate. Similarly, the insight into the engagement of the users can guide on how the platforms can develop participatory features that would enable real engagement as opposed to superficial measures of popularity.

The results of this study have significant prospects in the explanation of the future of journalism and regulation of digital media in authoritarian and transitional states. With limited freedom of the press, trust is more than ever the most important element to be cultivated because digital resources are the main channel through which information of the populace reaches them as well as a viable, active, and knowledgeable citizenry is based on the viability of the media. The need to create credible and open content can also be a politically important factor in a country such as China, where the official mass media is increasingly becoming dependent on digital performance and overall provocation to ensure that their pronouncement is no longer relevant and acceptable. Altogether, this paper unites the theoretical expertise of media credibility, online involvement, and literacy in an attempt to explore the variables that influence trust regarding Chinese online news sources. It contributes to the already rising discourse on digital media trust by paying attention to the interrelations of content credibility, transparency, user (dis)engagement and digital literacy.

2. Literature Review

In a world of growing digital news platforms, users are now at their most dependent upon online avenues for current affairs, analysis, and public discourse. This reliance has occurred at the same time as growing attention to problems concerning the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and trust in digital media (Newman et al., 2023; Tsfatı & Cappella, 2003). Therefore, it has become a question of extreme academic and practical importance to understand the antecedents of trust in digital news platforms. The purposes of this literature review were to analyze four core constructs, which are Content Credibility, Information Transparency, User Engagement and Digital Literacy and also examine how combinations and interactions of them collectively contribute to Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP). Hypotheses are developed from empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in each subsection.

2.1. Content Credibility and Trust in Digital News Platforms

Content credibility pertains to the extent to which users see content as impartial, precise, and reliable (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). In a world where disinformation is rampant in news media, the crucial factor is content reliability (Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022). Users continually depend on credibility indicators such as author transparency, a journalistic tone, and evidence citation; research has regularly demonstrated this (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Tsfatı and Cappella (2003) hold that a skeptical opinion of the media, if it is not extreme, motivates users to search for credible information and reward it, an increase in trust. Making sense of digital news, that is, identifying trusted reporting, is a task that Swart and Broersma (2021) identify as a thing especially that young people do when trusting the news digitally, often in heuristics such as consistency, source familiarity, and platform reputation. In line with this observation, Newman et al. (2023) found that when content credibility is ascertained to be high, trust decline on the platform is frequently counterbalanced. This suggests that trust derives more from content than the medium itself. Consequently, the building and maintenance of user trust in digital news platforms depend on available credible digital content, which corresponds to content that draws on evidence, has a clear source, and adheres to a coherent tone.

H1: Content Credibility (CC) has a positive effect on Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

2.2. Content Credibility and User Engagement

User Engagement (UE) refers to users' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral efforts in dealing with digital content (Brodie et al., 2011; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). Perceived content credibility has been shown in numerous studies to significantly boost user engagement on digital platforms (Lee & Ma, 2012; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2015). Audiences are more likely to take such actions as they believe news content is credible (Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2022; Vraga & Tully, 2019). Luo, Hancock and Markowitz (2022) show that the more truthful content perceptions of the users increase the amount of time spent with the content, further resulting in higher behavioral intent to return to that same platform. Just as Tsfatı and Cappella (2003) found that distrust of mainstream media does not prevent people from using information that appeals to them within those media. Swart and Broersma (2021) also indicate that as users begin to engage (see more, reach, and respond), they tend to engage in personal verification strategies (e.g., checking source vs. cross-referencing with other outlets) as a function of

credibility perception. However, creating such content that is both credible and worthy of attention is not only something that attracts the audience's attention, but it also inspires deeper interaction, which is one of the leading factors in creating meaningful user engagement.

H2: Content Credibility (CC) positively influences User Engagement (UE).

2.3. Digital Literacy and Trust in Digital News Platforms

Digital Literacy (DL) is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate information across digital formats (Hobbs, 2010; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2013). In the online news domain, DL is considered a determinant of critical trustworthiness in digital news sources. People with higher digital literacy with better abilities to identify misinformation, verify sources of information, and distinguish biased from objective news (Hargittai, 2005). As per Pennycook and Rand (2020) and (Wineburg & McGrew, 2016), individuals who know how to be digitally literate in especially, have been instructed to withstand disinformation on social media, and they will be unlikely to be deceived by material of this nature. Vraga and Tully (2019) assert that higher digital literacy has made users more skeptical about claims that are unverified and more trusting of websites that are seen as reputable. Abdallah, Obeidat and Aqqad (2014) state that digital literacy provides people with the means to decode algorithmic bias and, from that, become informed consumers. In agreement with this is McGrew et al. (2018), Marchi (2012) and Shin and Thorson (2017) who further investigated and proved that digital literacy training increases such critical evaluation skills and, subsequently, trust in credible platforms. Consequently, DL helps to bring about critical awareness as well as to build user trust in what is essentially an evolving online news platform.

H3: Digital Literacy (DL) has a positive effect on Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

2.4. Information Transparency and Trust in Digital News Platforms

Information Transparency (IT) is defined as the quantity of information that news organizations publish regarding their source, editorial processes, and potential conflicts of interest (Karlsson, 2010; Vos & Craft, 2017). In recent years, it has been identified as a critical component in the public's trust in digital news environments, given the prevalence of misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic bias (Plaisance, 2007; Tsftati & Cappella, 2003). This encourages institutional accountability and transparency that allows the users to measure the integrity of the content (Phillips, 2010). According to Craft, Vos and David Wolfgang (2016), there is a propensity for users to place more faith in the platform if they know why and how the content has been produced. Karlsson, Clerwall and Nord (2017) demonstrated that disclosing journalistic routines and corrections significantly enhances audience trust. Similarly, Diakopoulos and Koliska (2017) also reported that transparency of algorithmic curation positively affects credibility perception. Newman et al. (2023) have confirmed that platforms that focus on openness and transparency are more favored by audiences. Examples include visible cues such as bylines, links to sources, and editorial notes rather, that have been shown to improve trust evaluations (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Tandoc & Maitra, 2017). The results that have been obtained have been based on experimental research experiments.

H4: Information Transparency (IT) positively affects Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

2.5. Information Transparency and User Engagement

The practices of Information Transparency (IT) boost user engagement because they provide open access and inclusive reporting practices together with reliable journalistic methods (Borges-Rey, 2016). Audience perception of news organizations' clear practices for sourcing and editorial choices and fact-checking enables them to develop stronger connections, which results in more content engagement (Karlsson, 2010; Masullo, Riedl, & Huang, 2022). Users experience enhanced perceived control after they understand processing methods such as story selection and labeling procedures, thus driving behavioral engagement according to research by Stroud et al. (2014) and Karlsson, Clerwall and Nord (2017). Curry and Stroud (2021) confirm that sharing information regarding the content selection algorithm boosts the interaction of users and their credibility ratings. As Karlsson and Clerwall (2019) and Tandoc and Maitra (2017) note, capital-T transparency indicators that are visibly exposed to users enhance engagement by including such aspects as correction policy and reporter bylines, source hyperlinks. As Vos and Craft (2017) show, transparency makes journalism to establish the audience-journalist interaction, which transforms the ordinary readers into active participants. Online sources that offer open systems

that reflect comment regulating procedures and remarks pages display superior user loyalty as well as content dissemination (Lan & Tung, 2024; Masullo, Riedl, & Huang, 2022). The transparent nature of it allows users to receive news, as well as become empowered to actively engage in the news content creation process.

H5: Information Transparency (IT) positively influences User Engagement (UE).

2.6. User Engagement and Trust in Digital News Platforms

User engagement skill combines cognitive activities and emotional aspects and behavioral responses toward digital content (Brodie et al., 2011; Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). Trust in digital news platforms relies on familiarity together with perceived relevance as fundamental antecedents, according to Gefen (2000) and Ruggiero (2000). Multiple user interactions with content on social media platforms through likes, comments or shares and reading activities create relational trust between users and the platform (Riegelsberger, Sasse, & McCarthy, 2005; Tsati & Cappella, 2003). According to research by Kwon, Priniski and Chadha (2021) and O'Brien and Toms (2008), increased engagement by users improves their perception of the credibility of the platform as well as reduces uncertainties. Second, Masullo, Riedl and Huang (2022) also found that stronger trust is formed once one engages with more interactive or corrective content. However, Molyneux and Holton (2014) pointed out that quiz forms of news and polls and live chat formats for engagement news influenced the deep connection of users to news content and increased users' trust for the same. According to Vraga and Tully (2019) and Fletcher and Park (2017), trust does not arise solely from the quality of content but also from participation, especially continued participation, in a socially interactive environment. In so doing, they are more likely to foster and sustain the trust of their users.

H6: User Engagement (UE) positively impacts Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

2.7. The Moderating Role of Digital Literacy

The moderating effect of Digital Literacy (DL) is significant in users' content and platform features evaluation. Those with higher digital literacy can disambiguate credibility indicators, critically evaluate news, and apply cognitive filters in interpreting digital content better (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Hargittai, 2005). This capacity affects how they react to credibility and transparency cues in content, and thus lead to their trust judgments. Digitally literate users set a higher standard with regards to checking the source authority, journalistic tone, and linguistic quality and their responses to trust are more selective and discriminate (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Tandoc Jr, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Providing a confirmation of the effect in the process of evaluation, a perceived credibility and trust among the young news consumers were moderated by digital literacy depending on what Kanižaj (2019) revealed in his research. Compared to users with a lower DL, the users with a higher DL are also in a better position to understand and appreciate practices like source disclosure, corrections, or algorithmic transparency (Molina et al., 2021; Wineburg & McGrew, 2016). Vraga and Tully (2019) and McGrew et al. (2018) conducted another study that revealed that the DL enhanced the credibility of the users in transparency of the journalistic practices.

H7: Digital Literacy (DL) moderates the relationship between Content Credibility (CC) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP), enhancing the effect.

H8: Digital Literacy (DL) moderates the relationship between Information Transparency (IT) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP), enhancing the effect.

2.8. User Engagement as a Mediator

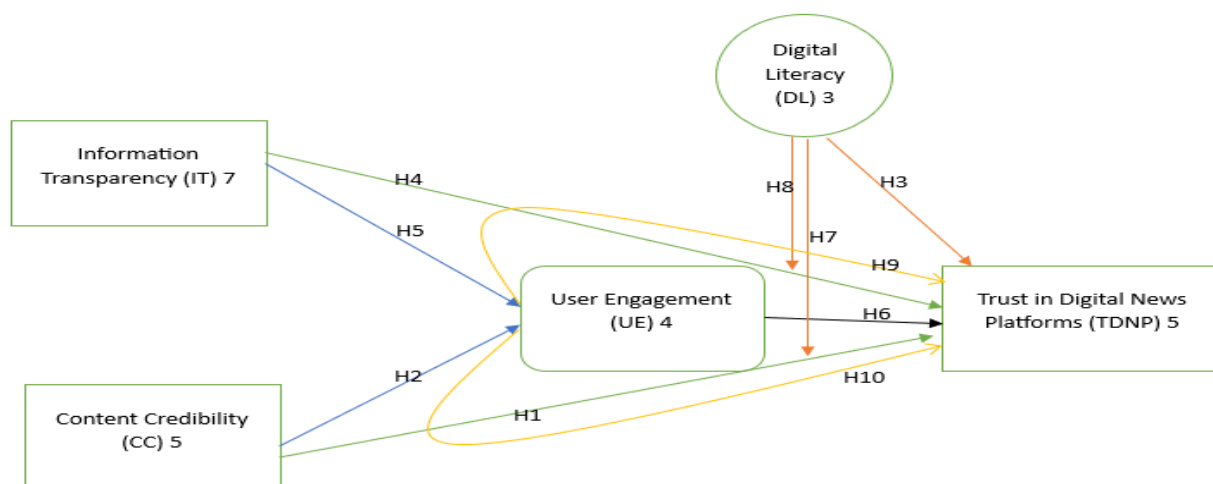
User Engagement (UE) is a very important cognitive and affective mechanism that builds the bridge between platform-level attributes like content credibility and transparency and trust outcomes (Lim & Ting, 2012). The lower the involvement, however, the greater the likelihood of processing less deeply and, therefore, developing less trust in the source based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty et al., 1986). Engagement is then understood as a mediator for either open editorial practice and for sourcing of content within Information Transparency (IT). Boczkowski, Mitchelstein and Matassi (2018) discovered that when users have access to journalists' processes—whereas in news circulation, this is referred to as transparency features—the users become more active and, by extension, develop more trust. And in a similar vein, Masullo, Riedl and Huang (2022) find that users who interact with corrective content containing

a nontransparent mention of the device responsible for spreading the content report greater trust. In the case of Content Credibility (CC), engagement has a multiplicative effect on trust. However, Wang et al. (2022) and Kim, Moravec and Dennis (2019) argue that credible content led by users can make them participate more intensively (i.e., sharing, commenting, reading duration), which helps to make trust in digital platforms. This is also supported by engagement in digital communication processes, as supported by O'Brien and Toms (2008), Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel (2009), and Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2015).

H9: User Engagement (UE) mediates the relationship between Information Transparency (IT) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

H10: User Engagement (UE) mediates the relationship between Content Credibility (CC) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' creation based on literature review

Taking the reviewed literature into account, this paper proposes the conceptual model presented below, which defines the proposed relationships among the main constructs, namely Content Credibility (CC), Information Transparency (IT), User Engagement (UE), Digital Literacy (DL) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP). Direct and indirect effects, mediating and moderating mechanisms are included, based on prior empirical and theoretical work. Every path is connected to a hypothesis (H1 to H10) that connotes the structure and logic built into the preceding argument.

3. Methodology

This study is quantitative cross cross-sectional in nature, and it seeks to find out how information transparency and content credibility of digital media in China affects trust in digital news platforms in China, with the contribution of user engagement and the moderating effect of digital literacy. The positivist epistemology informed the research design and underlines the objectivity, measurability, and statistical generalizability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study aims to establish causal relationships among these constructs of interest by using a structured questionnaire and analyzing the data obtained through structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The target population is regular users of digital news platforms in China. Both state-affiliated (such as Xinhua, China Daily) and commercial (such as Toutiao, Tencent News, The Paper) are the platforms. Respondents are selected by their regular consumption of digital news through either mobile applications or via the web. Purposive sampling was utilized to collect 300 respondents through online survey distribution channels, including WeChat groups, university mailing lists, and online forums. In this case, the non-probability sampling method is appropriate as it provides information from a certain and informed group (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The structured questionnaire consisted of five constructs: Information Transparency (IT), User Engagement (UE), Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP), Content Credibility (CC), and Digital Literacy (DL). The multi-item scales of each construct were adapted from validated sources. Specifically, Content Credibility was measured with five items adapted from Wathen and Burkell (2002) and Metzger and Flanagin (2013); Information Transparency was measured with

seven items based on Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010) and Al-Jabri and Roztock (2015); User Engagement was assessed using four items adapted from Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020), Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel (2009), and Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2015); Digital Literacy was captured using three items from Zahoor et al. (2023) and Hargittai (2005); and Trust in Digital News Platforms was measured using five items adapted from Flanagin and Metzger (2007) and Tsifti and Ariely (2014). A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure all items with 1 (strongly disagree) end of the scale and 5 (strongly agree) on the other end. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze data by the use of SmartPLS software. This is a good method for models with both mediation and moderation and does well with small to medium sample sizes (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). To begin, data were screened for missing values, normality, and outliers prior to model estimation. Tests for reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion) were conducted for measurement model evaluation. Path coefficients, t statistic, p value, and R² values were used for structural model assessment. From an ethical point of view, participants were aware of the purpose of the research, were assured of confidentiality, and were informed they could withdraw anytime. No personal identifiers were collected. University institutional review board ethical clearance was obtained. Voluntary participation was followed and all of the data were anonymized during analysis for the purpose of privacy and adherence to ethical research standards.

4. Results

The empirical results obtained from the application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS are presented in this section. The assessment includes the measurement model (reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity) and the structural model (testing the hypotheses on the relationships between variables). Then, multiple validation tests, such as the Fornell-Larcker criterion, HTMT ratios, etc., have been performed to report the Descriptive statistics and model diagnostics. The study's theoretical framework and research hypotheses are aligned with the discussion of each result.

Table 1: Convergent Validity Test

Constructs	items	Loading	Alpha	CR	AVE
CC	CC1	0.834	0.862	0.9	0.644
	CC2	0.801			
	CC3	0.787			
	CC4	0.802			
	CC5	0.785			
DL	DL1	0.877	0.843	0.905	0.761
	DL2	0.885			
	DL3	0.855			
IT	IT1	0.769	0.912	0.93	0.656
	IT2	0.818			
	IT3	0.821			
	IT4	0.817			
	IT5	0.805			
	IT6	0.808			
	IT7	0.829			
TDNP	TDNP1	0.853	0.896	0.923	0.706
	TDNP2	0.83			
	TDNP3	0.837			
	TDNP4	0.832			
	TDNP5	0.849			
UE	UE1	0.883	0.884	0.92	0.742
	UE2	0.83			
	UE3	0.857			
	UE4	0.875			

The results of the convergent validity for all five constructs — Content Credibility (CC), Digital Literacy (DL), Information Transparency (IT), Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP), and User Engagement (UE)—are presented in Table 1. Individual item reliability is strong as all item loadings are greater than the recommended threshold of .70 (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). The internal consistency of each construct ranges between Cronbach's alpha (α) values of 0.843 and 0.912, which is deemed to be satisfactory. Also, all composite reliability (CR) values are well

above the minimum acceptable level of 0.70, thus supporting overall construct reliability. All Average Variance extracted (AVE) has been more than 0.50; hence, more than half variance in the indicator is explained by the corresponding construct (greater than 0.50) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Collectively, these results demonstrate convergent validity, which indicates that these constructs are accurately and uniformly measured to one day anchor further structural model assessment.

Table 2: HTMT Ratio

	CC	DL	IT	TDNP	UE
CC					
DL	0.099				
IT	0.107	0.348			
TDNP	0.349	0.306	0.395		
UE	0.232	0.274	0.338	0.488	

Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios are reported in able 2 to evaluate discriminant validity between the constructs. As it can be seen, all HTMT values are well below the threshold of 0.85, which is recommended for the empirical distinction of each construct with the others Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015). The least observed HTMT value is between User Engagement (UE) and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP) [= 0.488], and this value also lies within the acceptable words. Results uphold the validity and reliability of these constructs to be used in further structural modeling.

Table 3: Fornell Larcker

	CC	DL	IT	TDNP	UE
CC	0.802				
DL	0.066	0.872			
IT	-0.094	0.308	0.81		
TDNP	0.313	0.267	0.358	0.84	
UE	0.204	0.238	0.304	0.435	0.861

The discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and presented in Table 3. In line with this criterion, each construct's (diagonal values) square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be higher than its correlation with other constructs (off-diagonal values) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All the diagonal values for constructs (Content Credibility (0.802), Digital Literacy (0.872), Information Transparency (0.81), Trust in Digital News Platforms (0.84) and User Engagement (0.861)) are higher than the values of inter-concept correlations in their respective rows and columns. For instance, the correlation between IT and TDNP is 0.358, which is lower than the square root of AVE of both constructs (0.81 and 0.84 respectively). Secondly, by greater variance being shared between a construct and its indicators as compared to other constructs; this confirms discriminant validity. The results confirm the findings of HTMT, and it validates that all constructs in the measurement model are unique and not multicollinear.

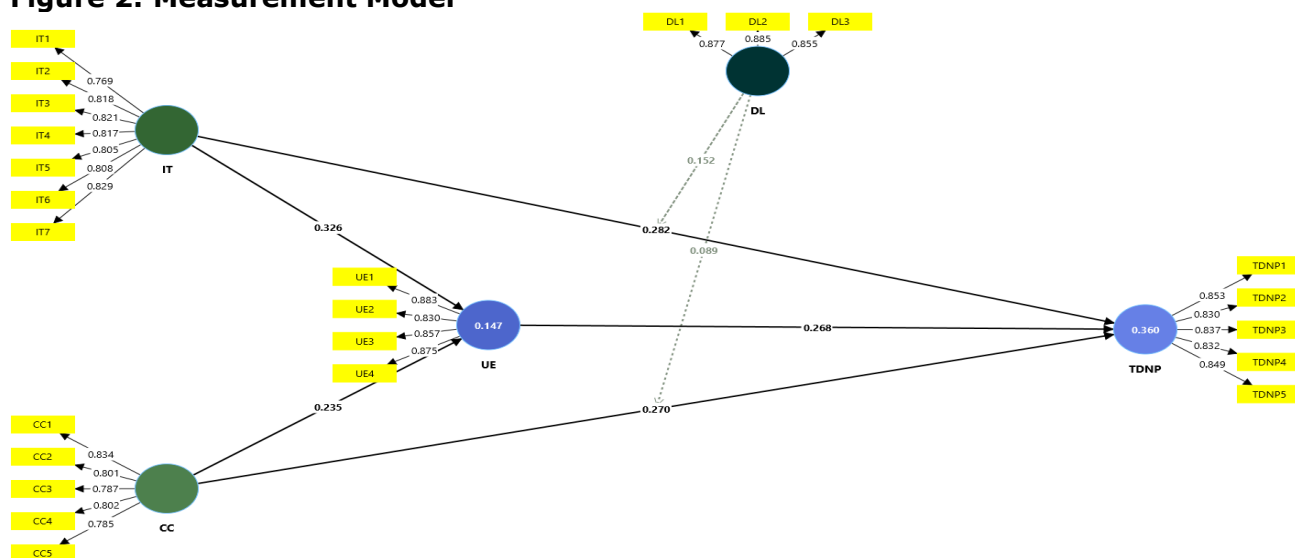
Table 4: Cross Loadings

	CC	DL	IT	TDNP	UE
CC1	0.834	0.036	-0.087	0.28	0.149
CC2	0.801	-0.007	-0.079	0.222	0.162
CC3	0.787	0.139	-0.072	0.214	0.161
CC4	0.802	0.066	-0.085	0.292	0.188
CC5	0.785	0.031	-0.05	0.233	0.157
DL1	0.089	0.877	0.241	0.213	0.213
DL2	0.005	0.885	0.308	0.252	0.214
DL3	0.085	0.855	0.253	0.231	0.194
IT1	-0.095	0.213	0.769	0.281	0.217
IT2	-0.032	0.261	0.818	0.321	0.249
IT3	-0.078	0.251	0.821	0.264	0.256
IT4	-0.053	0.327	0.817	0.296	0.253
IT5	-0.066	0.195	0.805	0.281	0.247
IT6	-0.154	0.247	0.808	0.265	0.243
IT7	-0.064	0.249	0.829	0.317	0.258
TDNP1	0.285	0.272	0.354	0.853	0.357
TDNP2	0.219	0.236	0.307	0.83	0.318
TDNP3	0.205	0.25	0.318	0.837	0.355

TDNP4	0.271	0.163	0.257	0.832	0.415
TDNP5	0.326	0.2	0.267	0.849	0.382
UE1	0.178	0.213	0.288	0.372	0.883
UE2	0.137	0.176	0.241	0.365	0.83
UE3	0.189	0.204	0.252	0.359	0.857
UE4	0.197	0.222	0.266	0.403	0.875

Further discrimination validity is assessed using the cross-loadings presented in Table 4. Finally, for each object, the measure on its supposed construction needs to be of higher loading point in comparison to loading points on other construction (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). Table presents the loadings of all the items on their respective constructs and it is clear that all items load highest on their constructs. Similarly, CC1 has a loading of 0.834 on the construct Content Credibility (CC), whereas the loading on TDNP is 0.28, and on UE is 0.149. DL2 loads 0.885 on Digital Literacy and has less strong relations to the other constructs. All indicators are consistent with this pattern and therefore each item should be considered as distinct in its measuring of latent variable that is underlying it. The results show that there is no serious cross loading of constructs and the measurement items have good discriminant validity. This adds to the reliability of the measurement model for further structural analysis together with Fornell-Larcker and HTMT results.

Figure 2: Measurement Model



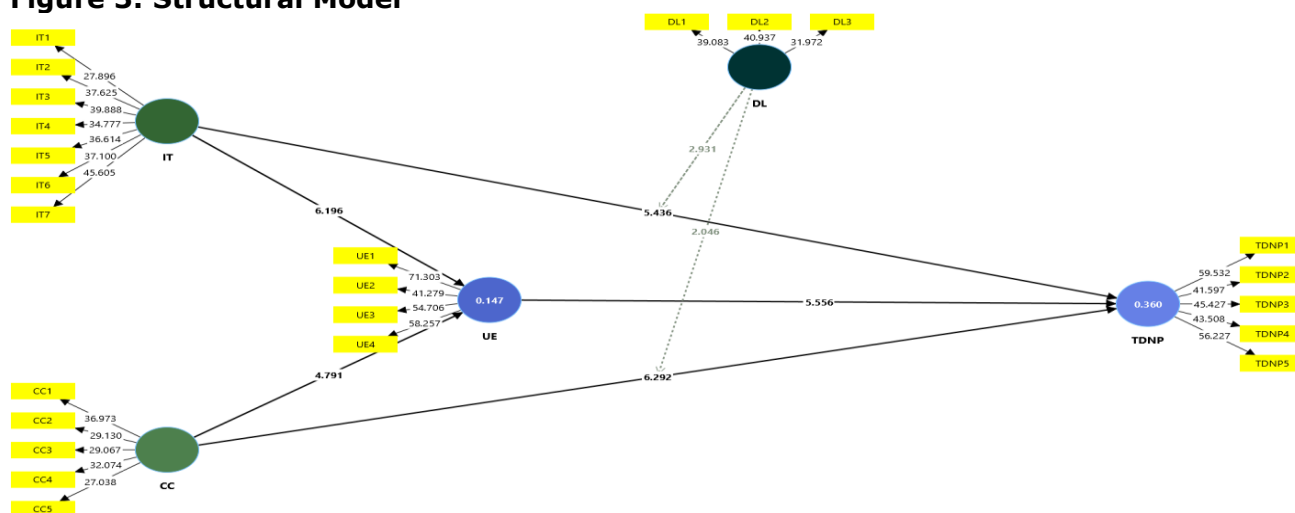
The measurement model shown in Figure 2 describes the relationship between latent constructs and their respective observed indicators. Indicator reliability is confirmed since all indicator loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Convergent validity and internal consistency of the constructs—Content Credibility (CC), Information Transparency (IT), Digital Literacy (DL), User Engagement (UE), and Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP)—have also been shown. The model also shows the direct and moderating paths specified in the study, with solid lines for direct effects and dashed lines for moderator effects. This supports the robustness of the model for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 5: Path Analysis

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
CC -> TDNP	0.270	0.275	0.043	6.292	0.000
CC -> UE	0.235	0.238	0.049	4.791	0.000
DL -> TDNP	0.098	0.101	0.048	2.062	0.039
IT -> TDNP	0.282	0.283	0.052	5.436	0.000
IT -> UE	0.326	0.330	0.053	6.196	0.000
UE -> TDNP	0.268	0.267	0.048	5.556	0.000
DL x CC -> TDNP	0.089	0.088	0.043	2.046	0.041
DL x IT -> TDNP	0.152	0.148	0.052	2.931	0.003
IT -> UE -> TDNP	0.087	0.088	0.021	4.164	0.000
CC -> UE -> TDNP	0.063	0.064	0.018	3.550	0.000

Table 5 shows the path analysis results of the structural model, which indicates the significance and the strength of hypothesized relationships. All the direct paths are statistically significant for $p < 0.05$, and the t-value is more than the critical value (1.96) (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021). Supporting the H1 and H2, Trust in Digital News Platforms (TDNP) ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$) and User Engagement ($\beta = 0.235$, $p < 0.001$) have a significant positive effect on CC. H3 also validated that Digital Literacy (DL) directly influences TDNP ($\beta = 0.098$, $p = 0.039$). Moreover, Information Transparency (IT) highly affects both TDNP ($\beta = 0.282$, $p < 0.001$) and UE ($\beta = 0.326$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4 and H5. Furthermore, H6 is supported by UE, as it predicts TDNP ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$). The confirmation of moderation effects is validated: DL significantly moderates $CC \rightarrow TDNP$ ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.041$) and $IT \rightarrow TDNP$ ($\beta = 0.152$, $p = 0.003$), supporting H7 and H8, respectively. Furthermore, mediation analyses replicate the mediation effect of UE on the path from $IT \rightarrow TDNP$ ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.001$) and $CC \rightarrow TDNP$ ($\beta = 0.063$, $p < 0.001$) and support H9 and H10. Collectively, these results support all hypothesized relationships and suggest a robust and well-fitting structural model.

Figure 3: Structural Model



Finally, Figure 3 presents other hypothesized relationship's path coefficients and t-values. Direct paths are shown in solid lines, and moderation effects through dashed lines. Finally, all t-values are statistically significant as it is greater than the critical threshold of 1.96 (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, the presence of leading ($t = 6.196$) and trailing ($t = 5.556$) paths between IT and UE, CC and TDNP, as well as between UE and TDNP ($t = 6.292$) for these can be noted as supporting the robustness of the model. The theoretical framework is visually validated with the use of a figure that confirms both the strength and direction of direct and interaction effects between the variables in the study.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study is to investigate how CC and IT are influencing TDNP in China and to evaluate whether UE mediates this influence, as well as whether DL moderates the influence. Theoretically and practically, the findings make a contribution to the digital journalism literature and platform governance in Chinese media contexts. The findings also revealed the significant positive effect of content credibility on user trust (H1) and engagement (H2), which is in line with the existing studies on the credibility as the foundation of digital trust (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). As the hypothesis suggests, plausible information enhances the perception of authenticity in users and promotes the idea that meaningful interaction can be established using news websites that assess the accuracy, fairness, and professionalism (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Sundar, 2008). It is particularly problematic in China, where the distrust of the state and commercial media has rendered the credibility factor a particularly important consideration (Swart & Broersma, 2021). Desirable positive impacts of information disclosure were also noted when there was trust (H4) and when there is involvement of the user (H5). This is connected to previous research that has indicated that procedural and algorithmic transparency is the way that participatory behavior and institutional trust are becoming motivated (Borges-Rey, 2016; Masullo, Riedl, & Huang, 2022). Transparency sends a message of institutional responsibility that allows user interaction and in addition to the legitimacy of the platform in the Chinese context of opaque editorial decisions bargained by

regulatory factors (Molina et al., 2021). This indicates the importance of exposing the decision-making process and content disclosure to the Chinese digital journalism.

Besides, it was also found that user involvement in digital news platforms is a significant predictor of trust (H6). This is an important finding. According to previous research, emotional and behavioral involvement, enhanced by platform interactivity and relevance, results in more favorable assessments of trust (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Such a finding lends support to the conclusions of those earlier studies. The findings support the notion that a simple passive exposure to ads does not create trust, but that users can actively participate in them to develop trust, in our case. Furthermore, the study further proves two moderation effects, where DL positively moderates the relations between CC → TDNP (H7) and between IT → TDNP (H8). These findings are further aligned with previous literature, among whom digitized literates are more highly prepared to assess the source credibility and transparency cues, inducing more rational trust decisions (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Wineburg & McGrew, 2016). The existence of this inconsistency in the level of digital literacy across user demographics in China suggests that 'this gap in trust outcomes' contributes to a gap within broader media literacy efforts. Secondly, two mediation effects are supported by the results. It turns out that UE mediates both the IT → TDNP (H9) and CC → TDNP (H10) paths significantly. Therefore, the more transparent you and your team are, the more credibility you have and the more you will be trusted not only directly, but indirectly because of higher level of engagement. This is consistent with the dual process perspective from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty et al., 1986), in which deep engagement enhances attitudinal outcome success, such as trust. Overall, all ten hypotheses are confirmed, and we show how content and platform characteristics exert their intricate pathways on trust. The model confirms an existing literature of digital trust in the non-Western, regulated media environment and contributes to existing literature on digital trust by validating a multi-layered model. Implications for platform designers, policymakers, and digital literacy educators in the design of a trustworthy news ecosystem in China are derived from these findings.

6. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The purpose of the research was to examine the mediation effect of the content credibility and information transparency on the trust and the moderation effect of digital literacy in the relationships between content credibility and information transparency and trust in the case of Chinese digital news platform. All ten hypotheses are supported with the help of the PLS-SEM and robust measurement model. It was noted that the user engagement in itself was a prominent mediator of the process of building trust as well as the role that the user engagement played in complementing the trust that either the content credibility or the content transparency level had on the user engagement. Also, digital literacy was a moderator and it dampened the influence of the two elements of content credibility and transparency on trust, as was pointed out as user competence in the digital news environment. Combining cognitive, behavioral, and technological aspects, the results expound theoretical information on the functionality of these trust-building processes in digital journalism. This study is enlightening on how trust is developed in the presence of such a hybrid media system where a country is fast becoming digitalized but at the same time has institutions that still dictate lifestyle.

It contains several practical implications. Investment in open editorial policies and provision of quality content by news houses and online platforms would be critical in enhancement of perceptions of credibility. It also features in the form of interaction encouragement elements such as comment boxes, commentary and user content that will also assist in enhancing user participation besides trust. Lastly, policymakers and teachers also should pay attention to increasing digital literacy among population groups and as a tool to counter fake news as well as to address news critical literacy. Despite the research shortcomings, my findings make direct contribution in analysis of effects related to new technologies, based on macro calculations and dynamic speculation. The purposive sampling of self-reported data of one country was thus generalizable. Future studies are cross cultural comparisons, longitudinal or experimental studies so as to confirm causal associations. Furthermore, other emerging influences such as AI-based content curation, platform liability/ algorithmic transparency should also be explored to gain a better insight into the way trust might potentially act in the future of the digital news ecosystem.

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