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Chang Sup Park, Daniel Thompson, Amanda Siew

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Trust in news accuracy on X and its impact on news seeking, democratic perceptions and political participation

Chang Sup Park* and Daniel Thompson

Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication,
University of Oklahoma,
395 W. Lindsey Street,
Norman, Oklahoma, 73019, USA
Email: parkcomm@gmail.com
Email: dthom1204@ou.edu
*Corresponding author

Amanda Siew

Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication,
University of Oklahoma,
2057 W Lindsey St., Apt G, Norman, OK, 73069, USA
Email: asiew@ou.edu

Abstract: Based on a survey of 2548 American adults conducted by Pew Research Center in 2021, this study finds that trust in the accuracy of news circulated on X (former Twitter) is positively correlated with following news sites on X, underscoring the crucial role of trust in news accuracy in shaping news-seeking behaviour. Trust in news accuracy also positively relates to political participation via X. Those who trust in news accuracy are more likely to perceive X as an effective tool for raising public awareness about political and social issues, as well as a positive force for democracy. However, exposure to misinformation weakens the connection between trust in news accuracy and users' perception about X as an effective tool for raising public awareness about political or social issues and as a positive driver for democracy.

Keywords: trust in news accuracy; social media; misinformation; news seeking; political participation; trust in news; X (Twitter); political engagement.

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Biographical notes: Chang Sup Park is a Professor of Journalism at the University of Oklahoma. His research interests include digital journalism, artificial intelligence, and news use.

Daniel Thompson is an Instructor of Communication at Langston University and a PhD student in Journalism at the University of Oklahoma. His work focuses on engagement journalism education and trust in news.

Amanda Siew is a Master's student with the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oklahoma. Her primary research interests fall within the topics of burnout among broadcast journalists, social media and Generation Z.

1 Introduction

Today social media function as a prominent source of news and information. Particularly, X (former Twitter) stands out among various social media platforms as a prominent hub for news, especially in the realm of politics, featuring updates from mainstream brands, alternative sources, and political figures (Robertson, 2023). However, social media platforms remain a breeding ground for misinformation (Macarayan, 2017), making trust in the content shared on these platforms critical.

Trust in the accuracy of news and information is a fundamental aspect of the information ecosystem (Pew Research Center, 2020). It influences individuals' willingness to engage with news content and their perception of its credibility (Newman et al., 2019). To date, limited research has explored how 'trust in news accuracy' translates into democratic perceptions and engagement with news. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating whether and how trust in the accuracy of the news circulating on X influences democratic citizenship.

Research has shown that trust in news is positively associated with political participation (Stroud, 2010). When individuals trust the news they consume, they are more likely to engage in political activities, such as voting and participating in public discussions. This study extends this line of inquiry to the realm of social media, X in particular. X, with its real-time information sharing and expansive reach, has emerged as a significant player in American democracy (Bimber et al., 2014). It provides a public forum for users to express their views, engage in political discussions, and consume news content (Park, 2013).

X's impact on democratic citizenship extends beyond the individual level; it can shape public opinion and influence political outcomes. As a medium that facilitates both information dissemination and conversation, X plays a vital role in shaping political narratives and fostering civic engagement (Park and Kaye, 2017). This study attends to the multifaceted nature of X's influence on democracy and aims to examine how trust in news accuracy within this platform contributes to democratic citizenship. More specifically, the current study examines whether perceived trust in accuracy of news/information on X influences

- 1 users' news seeking behaviour
- 2 users' engagement in political activities via X
- 3 perceptions about X's democratic effectiveness, such as its capacity to raise public awareness about political or social issues.

The current study also examines whether exposure to misinformation on X strengthens or weakens the relationship between trust in news accuracy and democratic citizenship. One of the contemporary challenges associated with news consumption on social media is the proliferation of misinformation (Naeem et al., 2021). The spread of misinformation poses a significant threat to democratic processes, as it can distort public perceptions and undermine the trustworthiness of information sources (Guess et al., 2020). In a landscape where misinformation can sway public opinion and influence political outcomes, it is crucial to understand how individuals navigate the social media environment. This study explores whether such skepticism is pronounced on X and how exposure to misinformation affects news seeking, democratic perception, and democratic participation.

To test our research questions, we analysed a 2021 survey data of 2548 X users collected by Pew Research Center.

2 Literature review

2.1 *Trust in news and trust in news accuracy*

Trust in news is a cornerstone of a well-informed citizenry and functioning democracy (Strömbäck et al., 2013). Trust in news pertains to the public's confidence in the accuracy, impartiality, and reliability of the information presented in news content. Trust in news extends beyond individual news stories and encompasses the broader institutions responsible for producing and disseminating news. This form of trust is characterised by confidence in the integrity and ethical standards of media organisations. It involves faith in the media's role as an information source, watchdog, and agenda-setter (Brosius and Esser, 1995). Declining trust in news media has been attributed to factors such as sensationalism, corporate ownership, and perceived political bias (Edelman, 2020). Trust in news media varies across different demographic groups and political affiliations, further complicating the issue (Funk, 2019).

Erosion of trust in news carries significant consequences for democracy. It can lead to information silos, polarisation, and decreased civic engagement (Sunstein, 2017). Lower levels of trust in news can also have economic ramifications, affecting advertising revenue and the sustainability of journalism (Picard, 2019).

Social media platforms are trusted by a considerably smaller portion of the population compared with traditional media (Barthel and Mitchell, 2017; Elvestad et al., 2018). However, paradoxically, social media have become increasingly popular as a channel for accessing news (Newman et al., 2020). These apparent contradictions give rise to questions regarding the extent to which people's news consumption habits are influenced by their perceptions of trust. It even leads us to question whether trust in news holds any significance for them at all.

Trust in news can be understood across various dimensions such as accuracy, balance, transparency, objectivity, fairness, and diversity of sources (Abdulla et al., 2005; Eveland and Dunwoody, 2001; Johnson and Kaye, 2000). For example, news which is accurate, factually sound, and free from errors is more likely to be trusted (accuracy). News stories that present information in a balanced and unbiased manner are generally trusted (objectivity).

According to a 2016 survey to 2014 American adults, Americans consider accuracy to be the primary overarching principle associated with trust. A significant majority, totalling 85%, deem ensuring accuracy in information as an extremely or very important element of a reliable source (Young, 2016). Research also finds that perceived accuracy is the most important aspect of news quality related to media trust (Prochazka, 2020). Accordingly, this study concentrates on ‘trust in news accuracy’, which is a narrower construct within the broader ‘trust in news’ framework. It specifically relates to the belief that the news content is factually correct and free from errors or distortions (Tsati and Cappella, 2005). We argue that accuracy is a crucial component of trust in news.

In journalism, accuracy stands as the bedrock upon which the credibility of news outlets is built. The public relies on news sources to deliver information that is not only timely but, more importantly, accurate. First and foremost, accuracy is synonymous with the correctness of information presented in news stories. In order to achieve accuracy, news organisations must adhere to rigorous fact-checking processes. This involves thorough verification of information from multiple sources, to ensure that the facts presented are not only true but also unbiased. The commitment to accuracy demands an unwavering dedication to the truth, transcending the pressure for sensationalism or haste in reporting. In the digital age, the fight against misinformation and the spread of disinformation adds a layer of complexity to ensuring accuracy. News organisations are tasked with navigating a landscape where misinformation can quickly go viral, causing irreparable damage to public discourse.

Trust in news accuracy is crucial for forming informed citizenship. Without accurate information, citizens cannot make informed decisions, hold elected officials accountable, or engage in meaningful civic discourse (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). It is the foundation upon which democratic processes rely. When citizens trust news sources, they are more likely to be informed and engaged in political processes, which, in turn, supports a healthier democratic society (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Extending this reasoning, trust in news accuracy may contribute to social cohesion by fostering a shared understanding of events and issues. When individuals think news to be accurate and credible, it promotes a sense of unity and trust within society (Nel, 2015). To the contrary, a lack of trust in news accuracy may lead users to disengage from news and politics.

2.2 Trust in news accuracy and news seeking

X, a prominent microblogging platform, has become a critical source of information dissemination in the digital age. More than half (53%) of X users regularly turn to the platform for news (Pew Research Center, 2022), especially to follow breaking news and live news events (Mitchell et al., 2021). Research suggests that the accuracy of information on X varies widely. Zubiaga et al. (2016) found that while some tweets contain reliable information, others are riddled with misinformation, rumours, and false claims. This discrepancy is partly attributed to the platform’s real-time nature, which can hinder fact-checking (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

More recently, X has been heavily criticised for enabling the spread of misinformation online, largely because of the changes made by billionaire Elon Musk. This includes X’s decision to roll back their misinformation policy to remove false claims about COVID-19 vaccines (Klepper, 2022), the removal of blue

checkmarks as verification symbols (Hammond-Errey, 2023; Ortutay, 2023), and the misinformation flooding the platform regarding the ongoing Israel-Hamas war (Ortutay, 2023).

People need information to make decisions and solve problems (Grunig, 1997). However, if that information is deemed inaccurate, people will not rely on it to deal with their problems. In other words, if people do not trust that news seen on X is accurate, they may choose to refrain from reading it or simply disregard the content of it. Individuals who do not trust the information shared on social media platforms are more likely to disengage or limit their consumption of news content (Edgerly and Thorson, 2015). On the other hand, people with high levels of trust in accuracy of news seen on X will feel more confident in the information they receive there. Individuals are more likely to access and engage with information that they trust, and trust in the content shared on social media is often based on the accuracy of the information, in addition to the perceived credibility of the information source and the platform itself (Lee, 2016).

H1: X users with high levels of trust in news accuracy are more likely to follow news sites on X.

2.3 Trust in news accuracy and democratic perceptions and participation

Trust in news significantly shape individuals' democratic behaviour. When citizens trust the news, they are more likely to be informed and actively participate in democratic activities such as voting, attending public meetings, and participating in discussions on public policy (Strömbäck et al., 2013).

However, when trust in news is low, individuals are less likely to rely on news media, resulting in less engagement in the democratic process. This, in turn, can hinder informed decision-making and challenge the very principles upon which democracy is built (Prior, 2013; Tsfati, 2019).

This logic can be extended to trust in news accuracy. When people have a serious doubt about news accuracy, they will not trust news, which subsequently increases cynicism about the world including politics. On the other hand, when people firmly think news is accurate, they will trust news producers and as a result will find more chances to engage in politics.

H2: X users with high levels of trust in news accuracy are more likely to report engaging in political activities.

Prior (2013) elucidates the fundamental role of an informed citizenry in fostering democratic participation. Drawing upon this study, we argue that trust in news accuracy serves as a linchpin in this process, as individuals rely on credible information to make informed decisions, take part in civic activities, and engage in democratic processes. In short, trust in news accuracy matters in social media because it underpins the principles of informed citizenship, public trust, and democratic discourse. As social media continues to play a central role in shaping the information landscape, prioritising accuracy becomes essential for fostering a responsible, trustworthy, and socially beneficial online environment.

Prior (2013) and Tsfati (2019), who emphasise the correlation between trust in news and democratic norms, suggest that individuals with low trust in news accuracy may harbour skepticism towards democratic institutions. People's distrust in the information

disseminated via news sources may extend to their perception of media channels, such as social media platforms.

H3: X users with low levels of trust in news accuracy are less likely to perceive X is an effective tool for democracy.

2.4 Impacts of misinformation exposure

Trust in news has been affected by the proliferation of misinformation on social media platforms (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). The spread of misinformation on social media, defined as false or misleading information presented as fact (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), has become a pressing concern (Meserole, 2018). Exposure to misinformation is a critical factor influencing people's perceptions and attitudes towards news and democracy. Thus, in addition to the role of trust in news accuracy, the current study examines what roles exposure to misinformation plays in news seeking and political participation.

Exposure to misinformation and news seeking. Studies show that exposure to misinformation can erode trust in news sources (e.g., Ognyanova et al., 2020). Individuals who are exposed to misinformation are more likely to become skeptical of all news sources, including legitimate ones (Duffy et al., 2020). Even, higher perceived exposure to fake news is significantly linked to lower media trust (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019).

When people do not trust news sources, they are less likely to consume news from those sources. Thus, exposure to misinformation may reduce news seeking. Kim and Dennis (2020) contend that exposure to misinformation results in a diminished sense of information insufficiency, subsequently fostering an increased inclination toward information avoidance. Information insufficiency pertains to an individual's subjective evaluation of the disparity between their perceived current knowledge regarding a risk and the level of knowledge that they believe is necessary for effectively dealing with that risk.

It is also possible that experience of misinformation acts as a catalyst for individuals to actively seek credible information from reliable sources. This desire for accuracy may drive individuals to turn to reputable news sites to obtain a better understanding of the issues at hand (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Furthermore, individuals who encounter misinformation may develop a heightened awareness of the importance of staying informed (Pennycook and Rand, 2019). The realisation that misinformation can influence personal beliefs and decision-making processes may motivate individuals to cultivate a more discerning approach to information consumption. This heightened awareness, in turn, can lead to increased seeking of news. Indeed, several studies have identified a positive correlation between concerns about fake news and various news-related behaviours, including the authentication of news, the discernment of authentic news, and endeavours to verify the accuracy of news (e.g., Chan, 2022; Chan et al., 2021). given the contrasting findings, this study poses a research question:

RQ1: Is exposure to misinformation on X positively or negatively associated with following news sites on the platform?

Exposure to misinformation and political participation. Exposure to fake news can lead to alienation and cynicism towards politics (Balmas, 2014). Misinformation can distort individuals' understanding of political issues, which may result in diminished

support for democratic institutions and a decline in civic engagement (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Individuals exposed to misinformation are less likely to vote and engage in other political activities, as they are more likely to be disillusioned by the political system (Guess et al., 2018).

On the other hand, there are claims that exposure to misinformation may trigger political engagement. As individuals recognise the impact of misinformation on public discourse and democratic processes, they may feel compelled to actively participate in the political arena to counteract its effects (Colomina et al., 2021). Furthermore, exposure to misinformation, by prompting individuals to seek accurate information, may inadvertently contribute to a more politically engaged and informed citizenry. In other words, exposure to misinformation can potentially motivate individuals to participate in the political process to counteract misinformation spread.

RQ2: Is exposure to misinformation on X positively or negatively associated with participating in political activities via this platform?

Additionally, this study tests whether exposure to misinformation affects X users' perception about X as a tool for democracy. When users come across misinformation, cognitive dissonance may arise, prompting a reassessment of their trust in the platform. Cognitive dissonance refers to the discomfort individuals experience when confronted with conflicting beliefs or information (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). Individuals tend to engage in more critical thinking and reevaluation of their beliefs when faced with misinformation, as they seek to alleviate the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. X is often considered a conduit for information dissemination, political engagement, and public discourse (Bouvier and Rosenbaum, 2020). Users' perception of X's contribution to democracy is closely tied to the platform's ability to provide accurate and reliable information. Therefore, the cognitive dissonance stemming from misinformation exposure may lead individuals to question the reliability of information on X, consequently influencing their perception of the platform's contribution to democratic discourse. Thus, the following hypothesis is posed:

H4: People who are exposed to misinformation on X are less likely to perceive X is an effective tool for democracy.

Moderating role of exposure to misinformation. The relationship between trust in news accuracy and perceptions about and involvement in democracy may be influenced by exposure to misinformation. Even those with high levels of trust in news may experience reduced confidence in democratic processes when exposed to misinformation (Kim and Dennis, 2020). Exposure to misinformation may affect the relationship between trust in news accuracy and following news sites on X. Individuals evaluate the trustworthiness and reliability of news sources to make informed decisions about the information they choose to engage with (Metzger et al., 2010). But individuals who encounter misinformation may experience a decline in trust in news accuracy, and as a result reevaluate their engagement with the news sources on X.

The relationship between trust in news accuracy and political participation via X is intricately connected and can be influenced by exposure to misinformation. Individuals who encounter misinformation may experience a decline in trust in news accuracy, affecting their overall engagement with political content on X. This decline in news engagement can manifest in reduced political participation, as individuals may become disenchanted with the information presented on the platform.

Cognitive responses to exposure to misinformation may play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' evaluation of X as a democratic tool. When individuals are exposed to misinformation, the positive effects of trust in news on democratic perceptions may be mitigated. It is likely that high trust in news does not always translate into positive democratic outcomes when misinformation is present. Given the lack of literature, we propose the following research questions:

RQ3: How does exposure to misinformation on X affect the relationship between trust in news accuracy and following news sites on X.

RQ4: How does exposure to misinformation on X affect the relationship between trust in news accuracy and political participation via X.

RQ5: How does exposure to misinformation on X affect the relationship between trust in news accuracy and perceptions about X's effectiveness as a democratic tool.

3 Method

3.1 Data collection

This research leverages data from a survey conducted by Pew Research Center during May 17 to May 31, 2021. The survey employed an online format and was distributed to a web-based panel. The American Trends Panel (ATP) was established by the Pew Research Center to be a nationally representative group of US adults selected at random. Ipsos is responsible for managing the panel. Pew Research Center, in collaboration with Ipsos, designed the questionnaire. The sample comprises panelists who indicated that they use X and are at least 18 years old. An iterative weighting method was applied to the final sample to ensure it matched the demographics and characteristics such as gender, age, race, birthplace for Hispanics and Asian Americans, length of residence in US, education level, geographic region, political party identification, volunteer activity, voter registration, and metropolitan status. Out of 2643 individuals initially selected, 2548 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 96%. Participants were given a post-paid incentive for their participation, with amounts ranging from \$5 to \$20, depending on the accessibility of their demographic group.

3.2 Measures

Trust in news accuracy on X. The survey asked, "How much do you trust the accuracy of the news and information that you get from X?" on a 4-point scale (1 – Not at all, 2 – Not much, 3 – Some, 4 – A great deal) ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.63$).

Exposure to misinformation on X. The survey asked, "How much inaccurate or misleading information do you come across when using X?" on a 3-point scale (1 – None, 2 – A little, 3 – A lot) ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 0.58$).

Following news sites on X. The survey asked, "Do you follow any of accounts of news sites or reporters on X?" on a 3-point scale (1 – None, 2 – A few, 3 – A lot) ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.69$).

Political tweeting. The survey asked, “How much of what you tweet about is related to political or social issues?” on a 4-point scale (1 – None, 2 – Little, 3 – Some, 4 – A lot) ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.94$).

Political participation via X. The survey asked, “Please indicate if you have done each of the following activities on X over the past year”:

- 1 expressed your support for a political campaign or candidate
- 2 replied to a tweet from a politician, political campaign or candidate
- 3 posted a picture or changed your profile picture to show your support for a cause
- 4 used a hashtag related to political or social issues
- 5 tweeted or retweeted about a political or social issue
- 6 tweeted or retweeted about a protest, boycott, or similar call to action
- 7 tweeted or retweeted memes or humorous content related to political or social issues (1 – Yes, 0 – No). Responses were averaged to create an index ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.33$).

Democratic effectiveness of X. The survey asked, “In general, how effective, if at all, do you think X is as a way to raise public awareness about political or social issues?” on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘1’ (very ineffective) to ‘4’ (very effective) ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.80$).

X’s impact on democracy. The variable was measured with the question, “Overall, do you think X is mostly bad for American democracy (‘1’), has no impact on American democracy (‘2’), is mostly good for American democracy (‘3’)?” Most people felt X has no significant impact on American democracy ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 0.89$).

Control variables. Participants were inquired about their gender, with 51.0% identifying as females, 48.1% males, and 0.8% in some other way. The mode of age was 30-49 (43.1%), followed by 50-64 (29.7%), 18-29 (15.6%), and 65 and more (11.3%). Respondents indicated their highest level of formal education attained using a 3-point scale, ranging from ‘high school or less’ to ‘college graduate or more’ ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 2.04$). Family household income was selected from a 9-point scale, spanning from 1 (less than \$30,000) to 9 (\$100,000 or more) ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 4.83$). The study requested participants to position themselves along a 5-point political ideology spectrum, which ranged from 1 (very conservative) to 5 (very liberal). In the modified version, 3 s were recoded to 1, 2 s and 4 s were recoded as 2, and 1 s and 5 s were recoded as 3 ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.74$). Regarding X use frequency, the survey asked, “On a typical day, how often do you visit X?” 1 – Once or twice; 2 – Occasionally throughout the day; 3 – Too many times to count ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.68$).

3.3 Analytic procedure

To test how trust in news accuracy and exposure to misinformation are related to news seeking, political participation, and X’s democratic effectiveness, this study ran a series of hierarchical ordinary least square (OLS) regressions. To test the moderation effects, interaction terms were created. To prevent the potential problems with multicollinearity

between interaction terms and their components, all the variables were centred before being used to create interaction terms (Aiken et al., 1991).

4 Results

H1 predicts a positive relationship between trust in news accuracy and following news sites on X. The analysis finds a significant link ($\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Among the control variables, education is negatively related to following news sites on X ($\beta = -0.132$, $p < 0.001$, Table 1).

Table 1 Hierarchical regression predicting news seeking and political participation

	<i>Follow news sites</i>	<i>Political tweeting</i>	<i>Participation via X</i>
<i>Control variables</i>			
Age	0.027	0.059	0.040
Gender	-0.034	0.034	0.027
Education	-0.132***	-0.038	0.022
Income	0.004	0.020	-0.092**
Ideology	0.027	0.163***	0.191***
X Frequency	0.055	-0.043	0.112***
Inc. R^2 (%)	3.1%	2.8%**	6.4%
<i>Misinformation</i>			
Exposure to misinformation	0.106**	0.142***	0.122***
Inc. R^2 (%)	0.3%***	1.3%**	0.8%**
<i>News accuracy</i>			
Trust in news accuracy	0.191***	0.112**	0.138***
Inc. R^2 (%)	3.3%***	1.2%**	1.7%***
Total R^2 (%)	6.8%	5.3%	8.9%

The beta weights are standardised regression coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

H2 anticipates a positive link between trust in news accuracy and political participation. This hypothesis is also supported. The analysis reveals that those who have high levels of trust in accuracy of news seen on X are more likely to tweet about political or social issues ($\beta = 0.112$, $p < 0.001$) and take part in political activities via X ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.01$). Those who have a strong political ideology are more likely to tweet about political or social issues ($\beta = 0.163$, $p < 0.001$). Income ($\beta = -0.092$, $p < 0.01$), ideology ($\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$), and X use frequency ($\beta = 0.112$, $p < 0.001$) are positively and significantly connected to political participation via X (Table 1).

H3 predicts a positive link between trust in news accuracy and X's effectiveness as a democratic tool. The analysis reveals that those who have high levels of trust in accuracy of news seen on X are more likely to think that X is effective to raise public awareness about political or social issues ($\beta = 0.109$, $p < 0.01$) and that X is good for American democracy ($\beta = 0.178$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3 receives support (Table 2).

Table 2 Hierarchical regression predicting democratic effectiveness of X

	<i>Raising public awareness</i>	<i>X's impact on democracy</i>
<i>Control variables</i>		
Age	0.057	0.034
Gender	0.094**	0.087*
Education	0.010	0.024
Income	−0.032	−0.018
Ideology	0.082*	0.034
X Frequency	0.111**	0.063
Inc. R^2 (%)	4.1%***	2.6%***
<i>Misinformation</i>		
Exposure to misinformation	−0.071*	−0.154***
Inc. R^2 (%)	0.9%**	3.7%***
<i>News accuracy</i>		
Trust in news accuracy	0.109**	0.178***
Inc. R^2 (%)	1.1%**	2.9%***
<i>Interaction</i>		
Exposure to Misinformation × Trust in News Accuracy	−0.072*	−0.088*
Inc. R^2 (%)	0.8%**	1.0%
Total R^2 (%)	6.9%	10.3%

The beta weights are standardised regression coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

RQ1 is about exposure to misinformation on X and its impact on news seeking. The regression analysis shows a positive association between the two variables ($\beta = 0.106$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 1). This result indicates that those who run into misinformation on X tend to follow news sites on X more actively than those who are not exposed to misinformation.

The analysis reveals a positive link between exposure to misinformation and political participation. Those who come across inaccurate or misleading information are more likely to engage in political activities via X, such as expressing support for a political campaign ($\beta = 0.138$, $p < 0.001$, RQ2) (Table 1).

H4 predicts a negative link between exposure to misinformation via X and perceptions about the democratic effectiveness of X. The analysis shows that those who come across misinformation via X are less likely to think that X is effective to raise public awareness of political or social issues ($\beta = -0.071$, $p < 0.001$), and that X is good for American democracy ($\beta = -0.154$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H4 is supported (Table 2).

Regarding the interaction effects, the analysis finds that exposure to misinformation weakens the relationship between trust in news accuracy and the belief that X is effective to raise public awareness about political or social issues ($\beta = -0.072$, $p < 0.05$, RQ5). Exposure to misinformation also attenuates the association between trust in news accuracy and the belief that X is good for American democracy ($\beta = -0.088$, $p < 0.05$, RQ5). However, the analysis does not find an interaction effect between exposure to

misinformation and following news sites on X (RQ3) and between exposure to misinformation and political participation via X (RQ4, Table 2).

5 Discussion

This study investigates the relationship between trust in news accuracy and its implications for news seeking, democratic perceptions, and political participation in the context of X. It also explores how exposure to misinformation on X influences those relationships. The findings offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of trust in news accuracy, exposure to misinformation, and democratic engagement in the context of social media.

Overall, this study demonstrates that trust in news accuracy, as an original construct within the broad ‘trust in news’ framework, plays a crucial role in shaping democratic citizenship. First, the current study has found a positive association between trust in news accuracy and following news sites on X. This finding shows the importance of trust in the accuracy of news content for news seeking behaviour. It seems that individuals who believe news/information circulating on X is accurate appreciate the credibility of the news sites and journalists who disseminate content through X and as a result are more likely to actively engage with them on the platform.

This result extends the existing literature on trust in news, which has consistently shown that trust in news sources is positively related to news consumption (e.g., Kioussis, 2001; Winter and Krämer, 2012). The current study, beyond the literature, highlights the role of trust in news accuracy in driving X users to seek professional news content on the platform. This study corroborates Mitchell et al.’s (2014) argument that individuals are more likely to engage with the news sources they perceive as accurate and trustworthy.

Second, the finding of a positive relationship between trust in news accuracy and political participation on X (H2) suggests that trust in news accuracy is beneficial to democratic engagement. When individuals trust the accuracy of news circulating on X, they are more likely to engage in political activities through the platform. This outcome can be connected to the previous findings that trust in news is associated with higher levels of civic engagement (Prior, 2013; Tsifti, 2019). However, this study demonstrates that beyond trust in news, trust in news accuracy is a crucial element that promotes an active citizenry. In a democracy, citizens need accurate and reliable information to make informed decisions (Jones, 2004; Jordan et al., 2016), whether it is about voting for a candidate, supporting a policy, or participating in public discussions. This is particularly true in today’s social media platforms people rely heavily on for news. When people trust the accuracy of the news they see on X, they are more likely to engage in the political process.

Third, the positive link between trust in news accuracy and the perception of X’s effectiveness as a democratic tool (H3) indicates that trust in news accuracy can lead to positive democratic consequences. When people see the news circulating on X accurate, this is more likely to lead to their perception about X as a democratic tool. Although X often confronts criticism related to misinformation spread (Krittanawong et al., 2020), users who have confidence in the accuracy of news and information on the platform may think X is a beneficial tool for promoting people’s awareness about political or social issues and a positive force for democracy.

There exists evidence indicating that trust in news plays a role in shaping the behaviour of online news consumers (Duffy et al., 2020). This study expands this line of research by examining the role of trust in news accuracy. Accuracy is fundamental to building and maintaining trust in news sources and social media platforms (Prochazka, 2020). Users are more likely to trust and engage with news content from sources they perceive as accurate. The erosion of trust due to inaccuracies can have detrimental effects on users' willingness to seek news and participate in the democratic process.

According to a recent survey by Gallup, just 40% American adults said they trust the accuracy of the news and information they get from the internet (Brenan, 2019). This somewhat contrasts with their trust in nightly news programs on ABC, CBS, or NBC (54%) and their trust in national newspapers such as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and USA Today (49%). Considering more people rely on social media for news, their perceived trust in the accuracy of the news obtained from social media should deserve more scholarly attention. This study demonstrates that trust in news accuracy is one pivotal dimension of news trust and can have a meaningful impact on social media users' news seeking and democratic engagement.

On surface, it appears that trust in news accuracy is closely connected to exposure to misinformation. However, while trust in news accuracy is a matter of perception, exposure to misinformation relates to experience. Experience refers to the direct encounters and interactions an individual has with the external world. It involves firsthand engagement with stimuli through sensory perceptions, actions, and personal involvement (Roth and Jornet, 2014).

On the other hand, perception involves the interpretation and processing of sensory information received from the environment. Perception is influenced by cognitive processes, past experiences, cultural factors, and individual biases (Jussim and Zanna, 2005). Unlike experience, perception can be subjective and may not always align with the objective reality of a situation. In short, experience is people's actual involvement in events or activities, while perception is the mental understanding of those experiences. Thus, it seems that trust in news accuracy and exposure to misinformation work differently.

Trust in news accuracy is a perception whereas exposure to misinformation is a kind of experience. When people actually experience misinformation on social media, what might be the consequences? This study finds that individuals who experience misinformation on X are more likely to actively seek out news from reputable sources on the platform. It is plausible that misinformation exposure as an experience overrides the assumption that misinformation exposure may correlate with lower trust in news accuracy.

The result may be explained by a desire to counteract the impact of misinformation with accurate and reliable information. When faced with misinformation which appears dubious, false or misleading, individuals may be motivated to seek out additional sources to diminish the uncertainty and alleviate cognitive discomfort (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Our finding challenges the common sense that misinformation exposure may discourage engagement with news sources, highlighting the complexities of information behaviour on social media and asking for more research about the impact of misinformation exposure.

A similar pattern is found between the relationship between exposure to misinformation and political participation. We find that individuals exposed to misinformation on X are more likely to engage in various political activities on the

platform. Again, misinformation exposure as a tangible experience may lead X users to an active citizenry. It is notable that misinformation exposure does not necessarily deter political participation. Instead, it may motivate individuals to become more politically active on social media as a response to misinformation exposure.

Although experience with misinformation can trigger news seeking and political participation, this study finds that those exposed to misinformation on X are less likely to view the platform as effective for raising public awareness about political or social issues and as a positive driver for American democracy (H4). This result indicates that X users may distinguish their actions of informational and political involvement from their perception about X. With X being seen as a more popular place for news and politics in comparison to other social media platforms (Robertson, 2023), it calls for further attention to examine the greater impact of misinformation on democracy and people seeking out news and information online to navigate through their citizenship.

The study's exploration of the moderating role of misinformation exposure (RQ3, RQ4, RQ5) provides additional insights. Exposure to misinformation weakens the relationship between trust in news accuracy and the perception of X's effectiveness as a democratic tool. This suggests that the presence of misinformation can undermine the positive influence of trust in news accuracy on perceptions of X's democratic impact. It highlights the challenges posed by misinformation in shaping individuals' views of the democratic potential of social media.

This study contributes to the literature on trust in news, as it suggests trust in news accuracy as a distinct concept and demonstrates its importance in the context of social media X. X stands out its functionality as a major news and information source today (Hernández-Fuentes and Monnier, 2022). But at the same time, X struggles with inundated misinformation (Rosenberg et al., 2020). With such contradictory features of X, users may attend more to accuracy of news/information found on the platform to decide whether they will follow news sites or journalists on X or whether they will engage in political activities via the platform. Although we cannot generalise our findings to other social media platforms, we can at least argue that trust in news accuracy is pivotal in understanding X users' news seeking and democratic engagement.

6 Limitations and future directions

The use of self-reported data may introduce response bias, and the cross-sectional nature of the survey limits causal inference. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to explore the dynamics of trust, misinformation exposure, and democratic engagement over time.

This study has not delved into the content of the misinformation encountered on X, which could influence individuals' responses. Analysing the types and sources of misinformation could shed light on how specific forms of misinformation affect trust in news and political engagement. It should also be noted that trust in news accuracy and exposure to misinformation were measured with single items. Following studies should measure the two variables using multiple items.

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