

# Influencers vs. Legacy Media on Instagram: Effects on Perceived Credibility and Following Intention

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## Abstract

Social media has blurred the line between professional journalism and personality-driven commentary, yet we know little about how users evaluate credibility and engage with news from influencers and legacy media when they appear in the same feed. This short paper investigates how political ideology and news source type shape perceived credibility and follow intentions on Instagram. We conducted a mixed-methods experiment where U.S.-based participants (N=120) viewed a set of real news posts and rated the credibility of four accounts (two legacy media-based, two influencer-based), balanced by ideology (two left-leaning, two right-leaning), and indicated whether they would follow each account. Our findings suggest that perceived credibility on Instagram is multi-dimensional, rooted in ideological alignment, yet moderated by institutional signals and perceived authenticity. These insights highlight how platform design and source dynamics can reinforce selective exposure, with implications for both mitigating polarisation and strengthening trust in online news ecosystems.

## CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

## Keywords

News Consumption, Legacy Media, Influencers, Credibility, Ideology, Social Media

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## 1 Introduction

Today's social media platforms serve multiple purposes beyond their original networking design. They now act as e-commerce marketplaces, creative hubs, entertainment platforms, but also as outlets to access the news. As a result, information is now increasingly delivered by independent content creators and social media influencers rather than professional journalists. Recent research shows that this is not just an expansion of the news landscape; it is a full-fledged shift, as young people increasingly avoid or disengage from traditional news, turning instead to digital platforms for information [48]. A survey conducted in 2024 by Shearer et al. [40] found that, while one third of U.S.-based participants specified news consumption as their reason for using Instagram, most of the participants reported exposure to news-related content regardless of their intention for news consumption. This trend coincides with the declining trust in mainstream media and institutional news [13]. Further, despite Meta's efforts to reduce the visibility of political content on Instagram for mitigating the spread of misinformation, experts and news influencers contend that the platform remains key for reaching "news avoiders" or those who felt alienated by traditional media [28]. In this context, research has recently started investigating how credibility and trust are constructed around news content on social media.

Social media affordances, such as sharing, liking, and commenting, introduce new credibility cues. As such, a headline seen on a respected news site might be evaluated differently when encountered via a Facebook feed or an influencer's Instagram post [51]. By leveraging the aforementioned cues to engage with audiences through informal, authentic communication, influencers often appear relatable and credible to their followers [7]. This gives influencers a unique advantage to cultivate parasocial bonds, which in turn shapes the perception of authenticity and transparency of their content [26, 37]. Authenticity is thought to be a key driver of trust



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in news providers [14], with audiences perceiving authentic communication as the *performativity* of the presentation [31]. However, it is important to note that the meaning of perceived authenticity can shift based on audience goals and the assessed medium. The authenticity of influencers is often evaluated according to the genuineness they portray, and whether audiences perceive their motivations as intrinsic [60]. In contrast, authenticity attributed to traditional news brands depends on their reputation for factual and reliable reporting; trust is rooted less in individual expression and more in institutional credibility [14]. Further, Gehrke et al. [17] highlighted that the name of the legacy news brands itself is an important cue for social media users, functioning as a shortcut to authenticate trust through their perceived journalistic authority. Hence, while news influencers gain trust through their audiences' perceive authenticity, it remains an open question whether the credibility of influencers can outweigh the institutional reputation of traditional news organisations on social media platforms.

Additionally, existing literature shows that audience political bias heavily shapes perceived credibility of news sources, and this effect appears across both social media and traditional platforms. People tend to view news outlets or influencers that align with their own political leanings as more credible, while seeing those with opposing leanings as biased or uncredible [25, 37, 43]. Further, political alignment can take precedence over factual accuracy in news consumption and sharing behaviours on social media, where users would rather share fake news that aligns with their political beliefs than factual news that does not [35]. This implies that ideological congruency remains a persistent determinant in shaping perceived credibility and trust. While recent reports highlight increasing trust in news influencers compared to traditional media [28, 34], research remains limited on whether ideological congruency may, in practice, override source-type cues in shaping credibility assessments within digital news environments.

In this short paper, we investigate the perception of influencers' credibility compared to traditional news organisations within Instagram. Specifically, we examine how personal political ideology and perceived credibility relate to user behavioural intention toward real Instagram accounts of partisan influencers and news organisations for U.S. audiences. We conducted a mixed-methods study where participants viewed four news posts, from two influencers and two news organisations, that are widely perceived as either left-leaning or right-leaning. We examined participants' perceived credibility of these accounts and how these perceptions influenced their willingness to follow news from these different sources.

Our findings indicate that source type alone did not influence left-leaning participants, while right-leaning participants perceived traditional organisations as more credible than influencers. This suggests that perceived credibility on Instagram is multi-dimensional, rooted in ideological congruence but also moderated by source type. These dynamics raise broader questions about how digital environments mediate trust and shape everyday information practices, reflecting ongoing concerns in human-computer interaction research [58]. We discuss the implications of these findings, and outline potential directions for future research.

## 2 Related Work

### 2.1 Trust in News

According to Tsifti and Ariely [50], trust can be defined as a relationship between two parties – the trustor and the trustee. Similar to previous research on trust, the concept of media trust is complex and multi-dimensional. In particular with receiving digital information, trust is the confidence users have on the credibility of the content [18]. Hence, a key way to understand trust in news is by measuring and analysing perceived news credibility [44].

Credibility refers to the evaluation or perception a person has on the believability of a message and/or the source [3]. Further, news credibility has often been described as affected by three main factors: the medium, source, and message [36, 45]. The medium refers to the channel through which the information is shared, the source is who delivers it, and the message is the content and how it is presented [13]. Recent literature highlights that medium preference correlates to overall trust in news [13, 39]. As such, people who generally distrust news tend to prefer alternative, non-mainstream media such as blogs and social media. Conversely, audiences with higher trust levels tend to favour traditional media such as newspapers [13]. Notably, those who prefer receiving information through social media have a high amount of trust on the social media platforms to monitor and regulate misinformation content [41]. Further, unlike traditional mediums, accounts and content on social media can gain more credibility through platform features such as liking, commenting or sharing [58].

With the rise of digital journalism [33], many of the sources classified as mainstream in today's literature now have a presence both in online and offline media [13, 39]. Prior research has found that trust in news sources is often similar across different media in which it is represented Kioussis [23]. For example, an individual's trust in a specific institutional source will be similar whether presented on their website or in a newspaper.

Furthermore, message and source credibility were found to influence each other. For example, studies have found that content presenting evidence [29] can positively influence trust in news sources. Conversely, message credibility can also be affected by the reputation of the news source [22, 57, 59]. This was long identified by landmark studies showing that the same message can be judged more persuasive when attributed to a credible source than to a less credible one [15, 19]. In this paper, we examine how these trust dynamics unfold on social media, specifically the Instagram platform, where a broad variety of sources can be presented in the same feed.

Political homophily has also been shown to play an important role in how people perceive the credibility of news. Iyengar and Westwood [20] found that people in the U.S. are more hostile towards others based on political ideology than race. In online spaces, previous work revealed that while Democrats generally exhibit higher baseline levels of political homophily, Republicans who actively follow official party accounts display higher homophily levels than their Democratic counterparts [6]. Further, previous work has shown that followers' political alignment with an influencer sustains their perceived credibility, despite the influencer's dissemination of misinformation [37]. However, Chouaki et al. [4] found that Facebook users are willing to consume opposing political news content when such engagement remains private from their

social networks. Hence, in this study we investigate how personal political ideology shapes judgments of credibility for news sources affiliated with similar versus opposing political ideologies, focusing on United States-based political context and audiences.

## 2.2 Emergence of News Influencers

There has been an emergence of journalist influencer personas in social media, with around one fifth of online consumers obtaining news directly from dedicated news websites or apps [32]. In 2024 alone, there was an increase in adults who consume news specifically from social media, particularly in the U.S., which saw an increase from 50% in 2023 to 54% [42]. A significant rise in news influencers on platforms like TikTok and Instagram contrasts with older networks such as Facebook and X, where the voices of traditional journalists and media organisations still dominate [32].

While trust in online news has long been investigated, research looking at the specific case of news delivered by influencers is still emerging. A recent experiment on Instagram found that a news post attributed to a source with demonstrated political expertise was seen as significantly more credible than the same content from a non-expert source, regardless of whether the source was an influencer or a traditional news magazine [59]. Prior work further shows that recommendations from ‘opinion leaders’ can increase message credibility and motivate audiences to seek additional information from those outlets [51]. However, users may also generalise a source’s perceived expertise beyond an influencer’s specific domain due to perceived credibility and established parasocial relationships, potentially exposing them to misinformation [37].

Additionally, studies on other social media (e.g., X) show that markers of expertise or authority, such as verification status or an account’s follower count, can serve as credibility cues that boost perceived trust in the information shared [53]. Conversely, signals of low expertise or poor reliability (e.g., an unknown individual without credentials) tend to diminish perceived source credibility [53]. Although expertise markers are known credibility cues, it remains unclear whether audiences weight those markers differently for institutions they already recognise.

Research has also identified distinct clusters of audiences, notably a “curated news-only” group who predominantly rely on algorithmically delivered news via social media platforms [8]. Yet, while reports map where audiences are turning for the news, very few examine how those audiences judge the credibility of influencer posts versus legacy brands, or how such credibility perceptions translate into concrete behaviours like following or ignoring an account. This study aims to address this micro-level gap, offering evidence that complements the macro consumption trends outlined above.

## 3 Method

We conducted a mixed-methods experiment to examine how source type and political ideology shape perceptions of news credibility on Instagram. The study was run on Prolific and received approval from our university’s Human Ethics Committee prior to data collection.

### 3.1 Participants

We recruited 120 participants from the U.S. that were required to be fluent in English, to have a Prolific approval rating above 98%, and to be frequent users of Instagram. Because ideological congruence is one of the primary factors that this research is investigating, participants were further grouped based on their political affiliation to ensure the survey was distributed to an equal number of participants, i.e. 60 left-leaning and 60 right-leaning participants (Appendix A). The same survey content was distributed to both groups of participants. The median time participants took to complete the study was 11 minutes, and they were compensated with \$2.5 USD.

### 3.2 Stimuli

Four Instagram accounts were selected to represent left-leaning and right-leaning perspectives across two source types: influencers and legacy news organisations (Table 1). For each participant, each account was paired with one of four news topics, selected to ensure diversity in content. To control for potential topic-specific responses, such as heightened sensitivity to particular issues when presented by ideologically aligned or opposing sources, a fully counterbalanced design was employed. Hence, it was ensured that the four chosen news topics were reported by all four Instagram accounts, making up a total of 16 sample posts in the stimuli library (Appendix B). The topics were:

- The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
- The U.S. Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)
- The 2025 deportations to El Salvador
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

**Table 1: Matrix of Instagram accounts based on their type and the political spectrum they represent.**

Ideology	Type of news source	
	Influencer	Legacy organisation
Left-Leaning	@so.informed	@nytimes
Right-Leaning	@davidjharrisjr	@foxnews

The influencer accounts were chosen from Pew Research’s sample of Instagram news influencers [27], defined as “people who regularly post about current events and civic issues on social media and have at least 100,000 followers,” not organisations. The legacy organisations were selected from a list of most trusted media by either end of the political spectrum as reported by Mitchell et al. [30] to increase the likelihood that the participants recognize the names as legacy brands.

The sample posts were kept in their original state, except that the interactive portions (i.e., comments and likes) and the date and time of the post were removed from the screenshot to control biases against perceived judgments of the accounts’ audiences and timing in delivering the news. Additionally, posts from the Instagram account @davidjharrisjr were manipulated by replacing his avatar with a gender-neutral picture and his username with an abbreviation (@dhjr, which from this point will be the username that this paper refers to this account as). This was to prevent participants from forming biases based on his display photo [9], and

inferring gender from his display name, which may bias perceptions of competence and trust [46, 52, 55, 56]. The other accounts already had neutral brand logos as their profile avatars, and non-personal account handles.

### 3.3 Measures

The main dependent variable was *perceived credibility*, measured using a 5-item, 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). This credibility measure was adapted from Strömbäck et al. [44]’s framework, which suggested that perceptions of credibility serves as the closest measurable concept for analysing media trust at an individual brand level. Accordingly, they base the framework on credibility items from Gaziano and McGrath’s [15] seminal work on news credibility for traditional news mediums, such as television news networks and newspapers. The scale assessed participants’ agreement with the following statements about each account:

- @[account name] is fair when covering the news.
- @[account name] is unbiased when covering the news.
- @[account name] tells the whole story when covering the news.
- @[account name] is accurate when covering the news.
- @[account name] separates facts from opinions when covering the news.

Additionally, participants were asked the following question after each assessment to get insights on their intention to follow: “Would you follow @[account name] for the news? (Yes/No)”. As this question was to gauge behavioural intention, a binary choice with no midpoint (Neutral) and ‘Don’t Know’ option was necessary for understanding participants’ definitive decision [54]. They were then asked to provide the reasoning behind their answer.

### 3.4 Procedure

Figure 1 shows the procedure used for this experiment. This study employed a 4 (Instagram accounts)  $\times$  4 (news topics) within-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 24 unique permutations that varied the combinations of Instagram account, topic, and presentation order, counterbalanced across the total number of participants. This ensured that all account–topic pairings appeared equally across participants, and that no single pairing or sequence dominated the stimulus set. The design allowed for more reliable attribution of credibility judgments to source characteristics, rather than confounding topic effects.

Each post was presented to participants one at a time (see Table 2), immediately followed by the credibility assessment and participants’ intention to follow the account.

We added two attention checks to the survey. The first one was shown in the middle of the survey, prompting the participant to simply select ‘Yes’, and the second one at the end of the survey, prompting the participant to type the word ‘Instagram’ into the text input. All 120 participants passed both attention checks, hence no responses were excluded from the analysis.

## 4 Analysis

We employed quantitative analysis to assess perceived credibility and qualitative analysis to investigate participants’ following intentions. The subsections below detail these approaches.

**Table 2: Introductions for each Instagram account. These preceded the prompt: “The following is an actual news post taken from their Instagram profile. Please read all the text carefully.”**

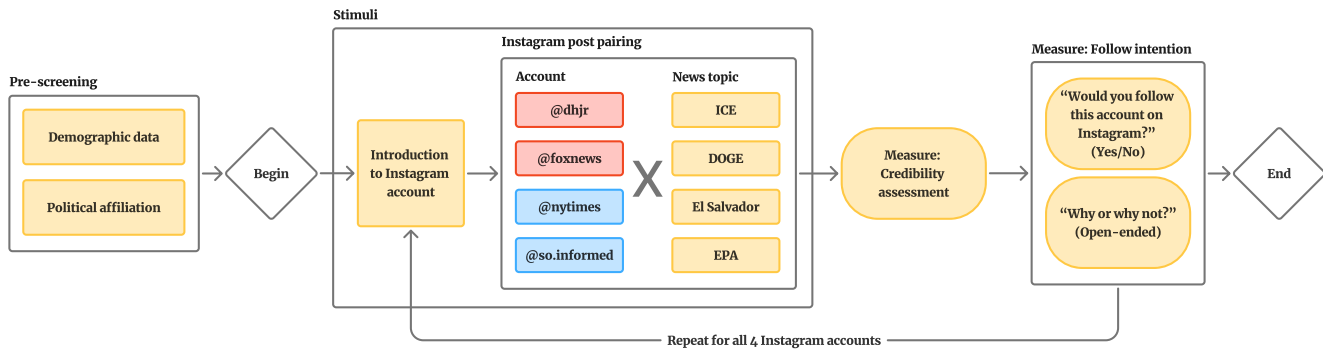
Account presentation
@so.informed is a US-based, left-leaning news account personally managed by an influencer.
@nytimes is a US-based, left-leaning media corporation, traditionally a daily newspaper.
@dhjr is a US-based, right-leaning news account personally managed by an influencer.
@foxnews is a US-based, right-leaning media corporation, traditionally a news television channel.

### 4.1 Perceived Credibility

To understand the effect of the source type and political ideologies of both the source and the participant on perceived credibility, we ran a Cumulative Link Mixed Model (CLMM) using the lme4 R package. We modelled item-level responses to preserve the ordinal properties of the data, rather than aggregating responses into a single continuous score through summation or averaging. Additionally, *Participant ID* and *Credibility Item* were incorporated as random effects to account for any differences between participants and variations in credibility items. This method allowed us to control for any potential variability in participant responses that could stem from specific scale items. Further, effects on perceived credibility were assessed via Estimated Marginal Means (EMMs) to obtain model-based, population-adjusted estimates in place of raw means.

As seen in Table 3, we observed a significant main effect of **Participant ideology – Right-Leaning** ( $\beta = 0.782$ ,  $SE = 0.318$ ,  $p < .01$ ) on **Perceived Credibility**, indicating that participants with right-leaning ideology have a higher probability of perceiving the accounts as credible (EMM = 0.968,  $SE = 0.215$ ), as shown Figure 2a. Similarly, we observed a significant main effect of **Source ideology – Left-Leaning** ( $\beta = 1.538$ ,  $SE = 0.148$ ,  $p < .001$ ) on **Perceived Credibility** meaning that sources identified as left-leaning have a higher probability of being rated as more credible across participants (EMM = 1.270,  $SE = 0.163$ ), as shown in Figure 2b. We also observed a significant main effect of **Source Type – Organisation** ( $\beta = -0.361$ ,  $SE = 0.148$ ,  $p < .01$ ) on **Perceived Credibility**, which suggests that legacy media source types have less probability of being perceived as credible (EMM = 0.927,  $SE = 0.162$ ). This is shown in Figure 3a.

We observed a significant positive interaction between **Source ideology – Left-Leaning**, and **Source type – Organisation** ( $\beta = 0.957$ ,  $SE = 0.214$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, the pairwise contrast suggests that right-leaning legacy media accounts are perceived as less credible than left-leaning accounts of the same source type (EMM = -1.141,  $SE = 0.110$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as shown in Figure 3b. Further, the interaction between **Participant ideology – Right-Leaning** and **Source ideology – Left-Leaning** was significant and negative ( $\beta = -1.162$ ,  $SE = 0.208$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In our pairwise contrast,



**Figure 1: Experimental procedure of this study.** Pre-screening collects demographic data and political affiliation, then participants begin the task. In the stimuli phase, each trial starts with an introduction to an Instagram account. Participants view one of four accounts (@dhjr, @foxnews, @nytimes, @so.informed) crossed with one of four news topics (ICE, DOGE, El Salvador, EPA). After each pairing, participants complete a credibility assessment, followed by a follow-intention measure with two questions: “Would you follow this account on Instagram?” (Yes/No) and “Why or why not?” (open-ended). The sequence repeats for all four Instagram accounts, with red indicating right-leaning accounts and blue indicating left-leaning accounts.

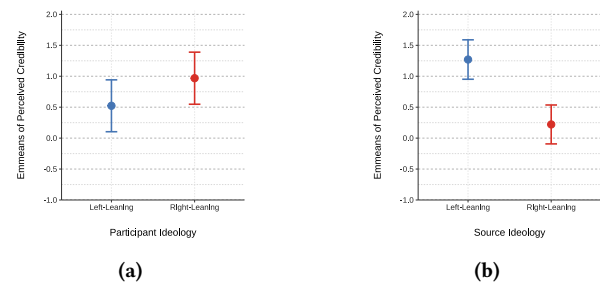
**Table 3: Effects of predictors against participants’ credibility perception, where the +/- symbol represents the direction of the correlation between the predictor and credibility rating, and  $p < .001$  denotes statistical significance.**

Predictor	$\beta$ (Std. Error)	$p$ value
Participant ideology – Right-Leaning	0.782 (0.318)	0.014
Source ideology – Left-Leaning	1.538 (0.148)	< .001
Source type – Organisation	-0.361 (0.148)	0.015
Source ideology – Left-Leaning $\times$ Source type – Organisation	0.957 (0.214)	< .001
Participant ideology – Right-Leaning $\times$ Source ideology – Left-Leaning	-1.162 (0.208)	< .001
Participant ideology – Right-Leaning $\times$ Source type – Organisation	1.262 (0.210)	< .001
Participant ideology – Right-Leaning $\times$ Source ideology – Left-Leaning $\times$ Source type – Organisation	-1.545 (0.301)	< .001

we observed that left-leaning participants were substantially less likely to rate right-leaning sources as credible compared to right-leaning participants (EMM = -2.016, SE = 0.113,  $p < .001$ ), as shown in Figure 4a. In contrast, the interaction between **Participant ideology – Right-Leaning** and **Source type – Organisation** was significant and positive ( $\beta = 1.262$ , SE = 0.210,  $p < .001$ ). The pairwise contrast conducted for the aforementioned interaction indicates that right-leaning participants rated influencer sources less credible than legacy organisations to a greater extent than left-leaning participants did (EMM = -0.607, SE = 0.106,  $p < .001$ ). This is shown in Figure 4b. Additionally, the interaction between **Participant ideology – Right-Leaning**, **Source ideology – Left-Leaning**, and **Source type – Organisation** was significant and negative ( $\beta = -1.545$ , SE = 0.301,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that right-leaning participants have less probability in perceiving left-leaning legacy media accounts as credible (EMM = 1.166, SE = 0.234), as shown in Figure 5.

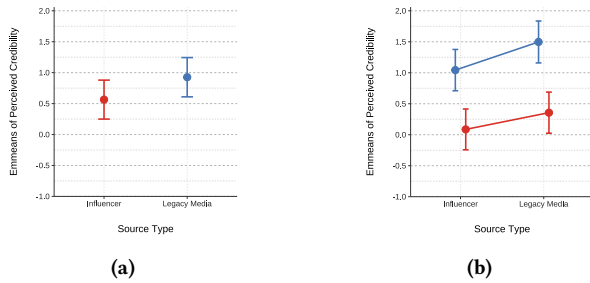
## 4.2 Following Intentions

We utilised Thomas’ general inductive approach [47] to analyse participants’ qualitative responses for their willingness to follow the four Instagram news accounts. The first coder conducted an initial read-through to gain a thorough understanding of the dataset. Next,

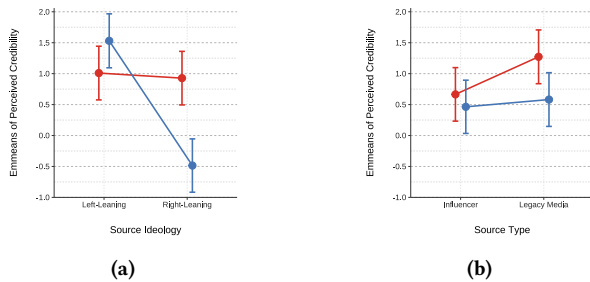


**Figure 2: Estimated marginal means of credibility by (a) participant ideology and (b) source ideology.**

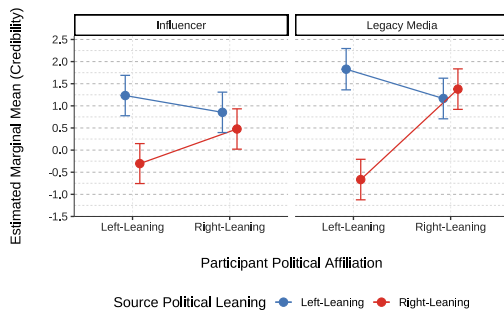
preliminary codes and their definitions were generated, after which two coders met to review and refine the set of codes and resolve any discrepancies in the qualitative framework. Once a final coding scheme was agreed, we conducted a coding consistency check where both coders independently and deductively reapplied codes back to participants’ responses. The codes were grouped into two high-level categories: Reasons to Follow and Reasons Not To Follow, which we further refined into nine subcategories. Inter-rater reliability was then assessed using Krippendorff’s Alpha to evaluate



**Figure 3: Estimated marginal means of credibility by (a) source type and (b) and mean change in credibility rating when sources' ideology interacts with the source type (b).**



**Figure 4: Mean change in credibility rating when participants' ideology interacts with the source's ideology (a) and type (b).**



**Figure 5: Mean change in credibility rating when participants' ideology interacts with source type and source's ideology.**

coding alignment [24]. We observed Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.83$  (nominal), exceeding the 0.80 threshold for reliable inter-coder agreement between the two coders [24]. Subsequently, all disagreements were resolved through discussions between the coders. The codebook used for this analysis can be found in Appendix C.

We present an analysis of participants' potential reasons for their intention to follow the different news accounts.

#### 4.2.1 Reasons To Follow.

##### (1) Perceptions of Credibility

Participants' reasons for intending to follow the Instagram accounts reflected their evaluations of credibility. One of the

reasons participants mentioned was the perception that the accounts report news in an unbiased and reliable manner. This was the most reported reason for the **Left-Leaning Legacy Media Account**, as stated by  $P15_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ : "Because it separates facts from opinions when covering the news, unbiased and is a very good source of reliable information."

Further, participants indicated that accuracy of the news reporting and the perception that the content reflects factual and truthful information were central to their intention for following the accounts. In particular, this was the main reason reported by participants for their willingness to follow the **Left-Leaning Influencer Account**: "I would follow @so.informed mostly because of the nature of the content that they post. I'm interested in local news, which is rare to find in most channels as most focus on international news. They also seem to be accurate, unbiased and able to separate opinions from facts." ( $P55_{Influencer(L)}$ ).

##### (2) Quality of Journalism

Participants expressed that quality of journalism was a factor for their intention to follow the accounts. They perceived the account content as 'well-researched journalism' ( $P4_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ ,  $P5_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ ) that provided sufficient details to the audience. Notably, participants felt that the accounts could be trusted when the content presented used sourced information that the participants also perceived to be credible: "It was well written and had used sources from another news site which leads me to believe it can be trusted" ( $P11_{Influencer(L)}$ ).

##### (3) Political Congruence

Participants highlighted political alignment as a motivation to follow the accounts. Participants expressed this reason the most for the **Right-Leaning Legacy Media Account**, and indicated that ideological congruence was more important than the accuracy of the news reported: "I am right leaning so I would want to see news like this and they seem to put in some effort into their post so I can get stories I may be interested in. I do believe they don't share full stories and are very biased however it doesn't bother me." ( $P8_{LegacyMedia(R)}$ ). Notably, some participants tied political ideology to how credible the source is: "Out of my political standings as well as an extreme right, I think Fox News is a trustworthy media house or news source." ( $P83_{LegacyMedia(R)}$ )

##### (4) Information Seeking and Diversification

Participants expressed willingness to follow the accounts for more news and updates on the specific topics those accounts covered. Additionally, participants valued the range of news topics covered ( $P93_{LegacyMedia(R)}$ ), as they seek to have diverse perspectives on the news: "I chose to follow them because, while I recognize their bias, I find their perspective valuable and balance it by consulting other sources to get a fuller picture of events." ( $P88_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ ).

##### (5) Presentation Style

Participants mentioned the presentation of news content as another factor for their consideration to follow the accounts.

Further, participants noted their preference for news consumption through ‘engaging content’ ( $P4_{Influencer(L)}$ ,  $P45_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ ), and the use of ‘captivating headlines’ ( $P47_{Influencer(L)}$ ).

#### 4.2.2 Reasons Not To Follow.

##### (1) Perceptions of Misinformation and Bias

Participants indicated that their belief that the accounts reported misinformation or exhibited bias in their content was a key factor in their unwillingness to follow them. Participants were unwilling to follow accounts they found ‘untrustworthy’ ( $P72_{Influencer(R)}$ ,  $P83_{Influencer(R)}$ ,  $P96_{Influencer(R)}$ ,  $P103_{LegacyMedia(R)}$ ) due to biased reporting: “The post seems to have a biased tone and lacks sufficient context or a balanced perspective on the topic. It presents the information in a way that could be seen as opinion-driven rather than objective, which makes it difficult to fully trust for accurate, unbiased news.” ( $P63_{Influencer(L)}$ ).

##### (2) Political Incongruence

Another factor mentioned by participants for their unwillingness to follow was ideology incongruence with the accounts. Participants would bring up the source ideology when indicating that they could not trust the account: “I don’t trust leftist media.” ( $P107_{LegacyMedia(L)}$ ). Further, political misalignment took precedence for some participants’ decisions, even when positive aspects of the news reported were acknowledged: “I like they put a whole story as their post that explained the whole story, however I am not left leaning or liberal so I wouldn’t really want to see posts like this” ( $P8_{Influencer(L)}$ ).

##### (3) Opinionated Tone and Emotional Framing

Participants also highlighted the account’s sensational or emotional reporting tone as a factor for their hesitancy to follow. Furthermore, participants negatively perceived the usage of opinionated tone as a means to sow division: “The post appears one-sided and uses emotionally charged language without presenting multiple perspectives or full context. For reliable news, I prefer sources that aim for balance and factual clarity.” ( $P16_{LegacyMedia(R)}$ ).

##### (4) Distrust in Source Type

Participants indicated they would not follow the accounts due to the source type, but only in the case of the influencer accounts. Specifically, 7 participants said they would not follow the **Left-Leaning Influencer Account**, 3 said they would not follow the **Right-Leaning Influencer Account**. In fact, some participants mentioned a preference for traditional news organisations: “The account does not seem to be a recognized or established source of reliable journalism, and I prioritize news from credible outlets with a strong reputation for accuracy and integrity.” ( $P4_{Influencer(R)}$ ). The influencer nature caused some participants to question the credibility of the accounts, as stated by  $P48_{Influencer(L)}$ : “The fact that it is managed by an influencer makes me doubt the credibility of the news.”.

## 5 Discussion

This study examined how U.S. news consumers evaluate the credibility of influencers versus legacy news organisations on Instagram, with particular attention to the role of ideological congruence. The findings reveal a complex landscape of credibility judgments that extends beyond simple partisan divides, offering insights for understanding news consumption in the contemporary social media environment.

### 5.1 Selective Exposure and Motivated Reasoning in Social Media News

We found that ideological congruence was the dominant factor in the perceived credibility of news, regardless of whether the source was an influencer or a traditional outlet. The importance of alignment across source types reinforces prior evidence that individuals prefer ideologically congruent news content even when offered several diverse alternatives [21]. Our qualitative analysis further contextualises this finding, showing that participants actively discredited sources they perceived as being ideologically incongruent. Interestingly, some participants remain steadfast in their perceived credibility and trust in ideologically congruent sources, even though they acknowledge bias or inaccurate news reporting from the Instagram accounts, reflective of previous literature on political homophily in social media [37].

This pattern is consistent with research on selective exposure and motivated reasoning in news consumption [13]. Previous work has shown that both left and right-leaning users judge identical news content to be more accurate and credible when attributed to an ideologically congruent source [5, 49]. Our study extends these insights to the context of Instagram, where source cues exert a strong influence on credibility perceptions. Yet the qualitative evidence adds nuance: participants often reported a willingness to follow ideologically opposing Instagram sources. Because mutual followers are publicly visible on Instagram, this finding contrasts with earlier research showing that Facebook users were willing to view politically opposing content only when doing so privately [4].

This indicates a subtle disconnect between credibility perceptions and following intention, as some participants stated they would engage with what they perceived to be less credible sources to maintain informational balance or monitor opposing viewpoints. One possible explanation for this is the growing distrust in news, which has led audiences to seek consumption from diverse political perspectives [1].

### 5.2 Right-Leaning Participants’ Preference for Legacy Media

Our study reveals that right-leaning participants tend to prefer legacy news organisations over influencers. While prior work found that source type seldom shapes credibility once expertise is accounted for [59], our findings highlight an asymmetry moderated by personal political ideology: left-leaning participants showed no significant distinction between source type, whereas right-leaning participants expressed a marked bias in favour of legacy media.

Cross-national panel data shows that audiences who rely on legacy or broadcast outlets retain higher levels of trust than those

oriented toward social platforms [12]. In the United States, Republicans report greater trust in national news organisations than in social media sources, even as their overall institutional trust remains lower than that of Democrats [38]. Similarly, recent survey data indicate that two-thirds of Americans still trust legacy news organisations more than public individuals or influencers [11]. These patterns show that institutional trust still serves as a key foundation of perceived news credibility [10].

However, our findings indicate that right-leaning participants are less likely to perceive left-leaning legacy media as credible. Yet, in our qualitative data, right-leaning participants consistently cited institutional credibility markers, such as newsroom size, fact-checking infrastructure, and accountability mechanisms, when justifying their preference for organisational sources. For instance, the @nytimes account was repeatedly praised for institutional authority and accountability, not only by ideologically aligned participants but also by those on the opposing side. By contrast, right-leaning accounts were rarely credited with such institutional legitimacy; here, ideological congruence was the dominant factor shaping evaluations. This points to the need for further investigation into the credibility cues that distinguish influencers from organisations, and how such cues affect message acceptance.

Overall, these findings suggest that right-leaning participants maintain stronger attachments to traditional journalistic institutions, even in social media contexts where such structures are less visible. This challenges assumptions about digital-native preferences and highlights how political identity interacts with attitudes toward institutional authority, reflecting deeper ideological orientations toward legitimacy and hierarchy.

### 5.3 The Persistence of Journalistic Authority in Digital Contexts

Our qualitative analysis identified several reasons affecting participants' following intentions, such as perceived tone and journalistic quality. This multi-dimensional evaluation process suggests that users bring subtle criteria to their news source assessments, even within the constrained format of social media posts. Further, participants reported credibility markers such as perceived accuracy, factualness, and lack of bias in their consideration for trusting the Instagram accounts. These markers led to their willingness to follow, reflecting prior work that suggested credibility as a key dimension for understanding media trust [44] and trust in digital information [18]. Moreover, similar to Gehrke et al. [17], we found that participants would rely on brand names of the legacy media accounts as a means to authenticate trust and determine willingness to follow.

This persistence of traditional credibility markers within social media contexts suggests that the transition to digital news consumption has not completely disrupted established notions of journalistic authority. Instead, users combine traditional credibility assessments with social media-specific factors, such as authenticity and personal connection. Recent experimental research confirms that users evaluate both central cues (source authority) and peripheral cues (engagement signals, conversational tone) together, rather than choosing one over the other [2, 16].

The implications for news organisations are significant. The institutional advantage documented in this study suggests that established news brands maintain competitive advantages in social media contexts, particularly among certain demographic groups. However, this advantage is conditional on political congruence and may be moderated by presentation factors specific to social media platforms.

### 5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Our study focused exclusively on Instagram, and credibility judgments may vary across social media platforms with different affordances and user cultures. We encourage future work to investigate credibility perceptions across multiple platforms and examine whether different affordances, such as short videos, will effect credibility judgments.

Second, while the study's focus on the context of U.S. social media users and political ideology was intended, audiences from other countries may be affected by ideological alignment in a different manner. Future research should replicate and adapt this study from the lens of political perspective of different countries to broaden the context and understanding of ideology congruence in users' perceived credibility of news account on social media platforms.

Further, the experimental design presented individual posts rather than sustained engagement patterns, which may not capture how credibility judgments evolve over time through repeated exposure. Future studies should track credibility judgments and follow decisions over time to see how initial evaluations evolve with continued exposure and interaction. The relationship between stated credibility ratings and actual consumption behaviours also warrants further investigation, particularly given some disconnect was revealed in this study between credibility perceptions and following intentions.

Finally, the study's focus on political news may not generalise to other news domains where partisan considerations are less prominent. Research examining credibility judgments for non-political news topics could reveal whether the patterns identified here represent general social media news evaluation processes or are specific to political content.

## 6 Conclusion

This short paper shows that traditional frameworks of media trust persist on Instagram but are shaped by political alignment and platform-specific factors. Political congruence remains the strongest predictor of credibility judgments with U.S.-based social media users, yet users also apply additional criteria, balancing partisan filters with cross-ideological exposure. Our mixed-methods approach highlights both the statistical strength of political identity and the nuanced reasoning processes behind credibility assessments. For news organisations, institutional advantages endure but depend on adapting traditional values such as accountability and fact-checking to social media formats. These findings call for more nuanced models of news credibility and suggest that, despite partisan influences, many users actively curate diverse information, complicating simplified echo chamber narratives.

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## C Following Intention Codebook

**Table 5: Codebook for Participant Responses of Following Intention**

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Responded “yes” to follow intention	Unbiased	Participant described account and/or news reported as unbiased.
	Perceived reliability	Participant described account as a reliable source of news or information.
	Perceived accuracy	Participant explicitly mentioned that the news reported by the account is accurate.
	Perceived factualness	Participant described the account as being factual, truthful, and honest with their news reporting.
	Good journalism	Participant had positive descriptions of the journalistic quality of the account and/or the news reported, such as being well-researched or giving detailed information.
	Provided evidence	Participant described the account as providing evidence, such as external validated and/or trusted sources.
	Political alignment	Participant described willingness to follow due to being politically aligned to the ideology of the accounts.
	Getting more news	Participant described intention to follow tied to getting updated on specific news topics or to receive more diverse news for a different perspective.
	Liked presentation style	Participant described liking the way content was presented, for example: clear, concise or engaging etc.
Responded “no” to follow intention	Perceived as ‘Fake News’	Participant claimed that the account and/or news reported as fake news or not grounded in truthfulness.
	Biased	Participant described the account and/or news reported as one-sided or biased.
	Not politically aligned	Participant mentioned unwillingness to follow due to differing political viewpoints.
	Issues with tone	Participant described perceiving the tone as too sensational or emotional, viewing the account as attempting to elicit reaction.
	Issues with the source type	Participant described not trusting the account because of the source type.