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How social media news consumption frequency relates to public evaluations of credibility and journalism

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Abstract
This study examines the paradox between social media news consumption and public trust, analysing how usage frequency influences perceptions of credibility, sensationalism, and journalistic integrity. Based on a survey of 406 respondents and analyzed through MANOVA, ANOVA, and Bayesian correlation, the findings reveal a significant but small effect of usage on perceptions of sensationalism ($P=.044$), with moderate correlations existing between perceptions of lower credibility, sensationalism, and compromised journalism (mean $r=.162$ to $.179$). Crucially, the frequency of use showed negligible direct relationships with perceptions of credibility ($r=.016$), difficulty distinguishing news ($r=-.026$), or compromised journalistic practices ($r=-.039$), indicating that critical public perceptions are interrelated yet decoupled from personal consumption intensity. This suggests that societal critique of social media news has crystallized into a widespread 'ambient awareness' a generalized climate of skepticism that transcends individual usage patterns prompting a re-evaluation of how media trust is formed in the digital era.

Keywords: Bayesian analysis, social media news, credibility perceptions, sensationalism, gatekeeping theory, agenda-setting, media trust

1. Introduction
The media landscape has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from traditional, gatekeeper-controlled journalism to an interactive, participatory digital ecosystem (Mugil & Kenzie, 2025; Singh, 2024) [16, 22]. This radical evolution is empirically demonstrated by social media's rise from a minor news source (5% in 2008) to a dominant one (72% in 2023), significantly displacing television and newspapers as primary information conduits (Siddaraju, 2024) [21]. For younger demographics, this trend is particularly pronounced, with a majority now preferring social media platforms over traditional outlets for news (Gilbert & Shah, 2024) [7]. While this shift has democratized information flow and empowered audiences as content creators (Mugil & Kenzie, 2025; Obasi, 2025) [16, 17], it has simultaneously introduced significant challenges to traditional journalistic practices and public trust. The erosion of professional gatekeeping functions wherein editorial selection and verification are replaced by algorithmic curation and user-driven circulation (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) [12, 20] has created a news environment characterized by a substantial "trust gap" where traditional media retains higher credibility than social platforms (Fotopoulos, 2023) [6]. This transformation operates within a framing paradigm where social media's algorithmic architecture prioritizes emotionally charged, sensational content, generating what scholars term "affective news cycles" (Entman, 1993; Papacharissi, 2014) [5, 18] that may reshape how audiences perceive journalistic integrity and credibility. Existing research effectively quantifies this macro-level consumption shift (Gilbert & Shah, 2024; Siddaraju, 2024) [7, 21] and documents associated challenges including misinformation proliferation and pressure on journalistic standards (Obasi, 2025) [17]. Qualitative studies reveal how audiences navigate this space, often encountering news incidentally and vesting trust in individual creators rather than institutions (Horning, 2024) [10], while news organizations adapt through platform-native content production (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024) [8].

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However, a significant gap persists in employing advanced quantitative methods to rigorously model how an individual's frequency of social media usage directly shapes their multifaceted perceptions of news credibility, sensationalism, and journalistic integrity. This study aims to address this gap by empirically assessing the impact of social media usage frequency on these perceptions, testing the hypothesis that social media negatively impacts news credibility and reliability (H_a), while examining specific dimensions including sensationalism prioritization, compromised journalistic practices, difficulty distinguishing reliable news, and comparative credibility versus traditional sources.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks Gatekeeping Theory and the second level of Agenda-Setting Theory (Framing) both of which provide explanatory power for understanding how social media transforms news dissemination and shapes public perception. Traditional Gatekeeping Theory positions journalists and editors as professional filters who control the flow of information through processes of selection, verification, and editorial judgment (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) [12, 20]. However, the rise of social media disrupts this model by replacing journalistic judgment with algorithmic curation and user-driven circulation. This shift, described through concepts such as "gate watching" (Bruns, 2018) [4] and "networked gatekeeping" (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) [15], means that visibility is determined by engagement metrics, virality, and platform logics rather than established editorial standards (Thorson & Wells, 2016) [23]. This erosion of professional gatekeeping helps explain public concerns about sensationalism and credibility decline in social media news environments. Complementing this, the second-level Agenda-Setting Theory (Framing) examines how media not only tell people what to think about but also how to think about it by emphasizing certain attributes of issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993) [13, 5]. Social media platforms operationalize this through algorithmic prioritization of emotionally charged, sensational, or controversial content, generating what Papacharissi (2014) [18] terms "affective news cycles." Such framing dynamics influence how audiences perceive journalistic compromise, the speed-driven pressures of online reporting, and the difficulty of distinguishing reliable from unreliable content. Together, these frameworks explain the paradox reflected in our findings: perceptions of sensationalism, credibility erosion, and journalistic compromise are strongly interrelated, yet they show weak direct correlation with the frequency of social media use. This suggests that structural transformations in information control and the dominant frames circulating in digital environments create a pervasive ambient awareness of these issues that is not dependent on individual usage patterns (Hermida, 2010) [9]. Guided by this theoretical foundation, the study operationalized gatekeeping concerns through measures comparing credibility between social and traditional media, and framing effects through measures assessing sensationalism and perceived journalistic compromise due to speed and publication pressures. The theoretical expectation that perceptual constructs would be interconnected but not strongly predicted by usage frequency aligns with the mixed results of our Bayesian analysis, which revealed significant correlations among perceptual variables but negligible associations between these perceptions and the amount of social media consumption.

2. Literature Review

The transition from traditional to digital and social media as primary news sources is a well-chronicled global phenomenon. This shift is driven by technological advancements that have made news more accessible, immediate, and cost-effective, leading to a diversified media landscape where online platforms and social media are significant channels, especially for younger users (Fotopoulos, 2023; Rai, 2022; Siddaraju, 2024) [6, 21]. In this new ecology, news consumption is often passive and incidental; users encounter news while engaging with platforms primarily for social connection and entertainment, rather than actively seeking it out (Horning, 2024) [10]. Beyond social media, traditional media platforms continue to play crucial roles in information dissemination across various domains. For instance, research in agricultural contexts demonstrates that radio remains the dominant medium for accessing information in rural areas, with television and other mass media serving complementary functions (Kasonta, Thakur, & Ahmed, 2024) [11]. This suggests that different media platforms serve distinct informational needs across different contexts, and evaluations of media credibility should consider these platform-specific roles.

A central and persistent theme in the literature is the crisis of credibility and trust associated with social media news. Beyond credibility concerns, the social media environment presents direct threats to journalistic practitioners themselves. Research has documented how digital platforms facilitate targeted harassment against journalists, particularly women, which can undermine their professional efficacy and psychological well-being (Ahmed *et al*., 2024) [11]. Empirical studies consistently reveal a "trust gap," where publicly owned television, radio, and print press are trusted more than online news platforms and social media channels (Fotopoulos, 2023) [6]. Surveys indicate that only a minority of users fully trust the reliability of news on social media, with a majority expressing uncertainty or outright disbelief (Gilbert & Shah, 2024) [7]. This skepticism is linked to the erosion of traditional gatekeeping functions, the abundance of user-generated content, and the proliferation of misinformation (Mugil & Kenzie, 2025; Obasi, 2025) [16, 17].

Research into how audiences evaluate credibility on these platforms provides nuance. Studies applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) find that users, particularly digital natives, often employ a hybrid cognitive strategy (Horning, 2024) [10]. Further research on selective exposure, where individuals systematically favour information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs while avoiding contradictory viewpoints, a phenomenon exacerbated by algorithmic curation on digital platforms (Ahmed & Singh, 2025) [2]. They may initially rely on peripheral cues (e.g., a creator's perceived authenticity or attractiveness) but engage central route processing to cross-reference and verify claims using search engines or legacy media reports, demonstrating a fluid adaptation to the high-volume, low-trust information environment (Horning, 2024) [10]. Trust becomes personalized, vested in individual content creators based on perceived lived experience and parasocial relationships,

rather than in institutional media brands (Horning, 2024) [10]. Beyond credibility concerns, patterns of representation within media coverage themselves warrant examination. Research on Indian print media has documented persistent gender disparities in visual representation, with female athletes receiving substantially less photographic coverage than their male counterparts during major sporting events (Ahmed, 2022) [1]. Such representational biases in traditional media may inform broader public perceptions about whose voices and achievements are deemed newsworthy.

Concurrently, news organizations have not been passive. A growing body of work examines the "dislocation of news journalism," where news production itself migrates to third-party platforms. Comparative analyses show that outlets develop distinct, platform-specific strategies, tailoring content to the unique affordances and logics of Instagram versus TikTok, moving beyond simple content repurposing to create native journalistic formats (Hendrickx & Vázquez-Herrero, 2024) [8]. This represents a strategic normalization of social media journalism within newsrooms, as they attempt to reach audiences where they are.

Despite this rich body of work on consumption patterns, credibility assessments, and production adaptations, a salient gap remains. Few studies have quantitatively examined the direct relationship between the *intensity* of an individual's social media use for news and their specific perceptions of credibility, sensationalism, and journalistic integrity. While we know social media is widely used and widely distrusted, and we understand some qualitative mechanisms of trust formation, we lack a robust statistical model of how usage frequency correlates with a spectrum of critical perceptions. This study seeks to fill this gap by employing a multi-method quantitative approach, including Bayesian analysis, to rigorously test these relationships.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design
This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between social media usage frequency and perceptions of news credibility and journalistic practices. The cross-sectional approach was deemed appropriate for efficiently capturing the current state of perceptions and associations between variables at a single point in time, aligning with the study's objective to model relationships between usage patterns and perceptual outcomes.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection
Data were collected from a total sample of N=406 participants over a period spanning July 2024 to January 2025. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation from two key stakeholder groups: (1) media professionals (including journalists, editors, and media researchers) and (2) general news consumers. This stratification enabled a broader perspective on the issues under study. Participants were recruited from urban centers within the National Capital Region (NCR) of India. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18 or above, residents of the target urban areas, and active users of social media platforms. Data collection utilized a mixed-mode approach: surveys were distributed online via Google Forms to professional networks and social media groups, and in-person paper-based surveys were administered at

media organizations and public spaces to mitigate digital access bias and increase response diversity.

The sample was distributed across five levels of social media usage frequency for news consumption: Never (N=81), Rarely (N=78), Sometimes (N=82), Often (N=80), and Very Frequently (N=85). The urban-centric nature of the sample is acknowledged as a limitation for generalizability to rural populations.

3.3 Measures and Instrumentation
Data were gathered using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The four key perceptual variables from the conceptual model were operationalized using single-item measures on a standard 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). The use of clear, face-valid single items for complex constructs is supported in survey research when the construct is sufficiently narrow and unambiguous to the respondent. The specific items were:

Independent Variable: The frequency of using social media to access news content, measured on a 5-point ordinal scale (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, 5=Very Frequently).

Dependent Variables
- **Perception of Sensationalism:** Social media platforms prioritize sensationalism over factual accuracy in news content.
- **Perception of Compromised Journalism:** Journalistic practices have been compromised due to the pressure to publish quickly on social media.
- **Perception of Reliability Difficulty**: Social media has made it harder for audiences to distinguish between reliable and unreliable news.
- **Perception of Comparative Credibility**: News content shared on social media is less credible than traditional news sources.

The questionnaire underwent content validation through consultation with three academic experts in media studies and two senior media practitioners. A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants, and minor refinements were made to phrasing for clarity based on feedback.

3.4 Data Analysis
All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 30. A three-pronged analytical strategy was implemented:
- **Preliminary Analysis**: Means and standard deviations were calculated for all variables by usage frequency groups. A one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the overall effect of usage frequency on the four dependent variables simultaneously, followed by univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for each dependent variable. Parameter estimates from the general linear model were examined to understand specific differences between usage frequency groups, using "Very Frequently" as the reference category.
- **Primary Analysis**: Bayesian correlation analysis was conducted to quantify the strength and certainty of the relationships between all measured variables (the four perceptions and usage frequency). Bayesian statistics were chosen due to their advantages in providing direct

probabilistic interpretations of parameters through posterior distributions and credible intervals, which offer more intuitive evidence assessment than frequentist p-values. The Bayesian correlation procedure in SPSS was used, employing Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) methods for estimation. For each analysis, reference (non-informative) priors were specified, ensuring that prior beliefs were minimally influential and posterior distributions were overwhelmingly informed by the observed data. The key outputs for each correlation coefficient (ρ) included the posterior mean (the average estimate of the correlation), the posterior variance, and the 95% Highest Density Credible Interval (CI). In Bayesian inference, a relationship is considered statistically credible if the 95% CI does not include zero.

- **Visualization**: Key relationships identified in the correlation analysis were visualized using plots of the posterior distributions, illustrating the most probable correlation values given the observed data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations
The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw. Written or digital informed consent was obtained prior to participation. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring participant anonymity. All data were aggregated for analysis and stored securely on encrypted, password-protected drives accessible only to the core research team.

3.6 Hypotheses
The study tested one main hypothesis and four sub-hypotheses:

- **Main H_a**: Social media negatively impacts the credibility and reliability of news content.
- **H_{a1}**: Social media usage frequency significantly influences perceptions of sensationalism in news content.
- **H_{a2}**: Social media usage frequency significantly impacts perceptions of journalism being compromised due to publishing pressures.
- **H_{a3}**: Social media usage frequency significantly affects perceptions of difficulty in distinguishing reliable news.
- **H_{a4}**: Social media usage frequency significantly impacts perceptions of credibility compared to traditional news.

4. Results
Descriptive and Preliminary Analysis
The final sample consisted of 406 respondents. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the four primary perceptual variables, stratified by the frequency of social media use for news consumption. The sample was distributed across five usage categories: Never (N=81), Rarely (N=78), Sometimes (N=82), Often (N=80), and Very Frequently (N=85). Overall mean scores indicated moderate to moderate-high agreement with all four negative perceptions of social media news: sensationalism over accuracy (M=3.26, SD=1.377), compromised journalistic practices (M=3.35, SD=1.487), difficulty distinguishing reliable news (M=3.29, SD=1.405), and lower credibility compared to traditional news (M=3.32, SD=1.348). A visual trend suggested that mean scores for perceiving sensationalism increased with usage frequency, from 2.88 (Never) to 3.44 (Sometimes and Very Frequently). Perceptions of compromised journalism were highest among "Sometimes" users (M=3.66), while the belief in lower comparative credibility was most pronounced among "Often" users (M=3.68).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for perceptions of social media's impact by usage frequency

Usage Frequency	N	Sensationalism over Accuracy, Mean (SD)	Journalistic Practices Compromised, Mean (SD)	Harder to Distinguish Reliable News, Mean (SD)	Less Credible than Traditional News, Mean (SD)
Never	81	2.88 (1.317)	3.26 (1.523)	3.36 (1.372)	3.21 (1.348)
Rarely	78	3.18 (1.475)	3.41 (1.454)	3.19 (1.512)	3.28 (1.258)
Sometimes	82	3.44 (1.371)	3.66 (1.363)	3.44 (1.297)	3.32 (1.360)
Often	80	3.36 (1.245)	3.31 (1.572)	3.28 (1.449)	3.68 (1.376)
Very Frequently	85	3.44 (1.418)	3.11 (1.496)	3.19 (1.410)	3.11 (1.354)
Total	406	3.26 (1.377)	3.35 (1.487)	3.29 (1.405)	3.32 (1.348)

Multivariate analysis of variance
A one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the overall effect of social media usage frequency on the four dependent perception variables simultaneously. As shown in Table 2, the intercept was highly significant (Wilks' Λ=.059, $F(4, 398)$=1583.387, p<.001). The multivariate effect of the independent variable (usage frequency), however, was not statistically significant at α=.05 (Wilks' Λ=.938, $F(16, 1216.548)$=1.607, P=.060). Other multivariate test statistics (Pillai's Trace, Hotelling's Trace) yielded similar non-significant results, with only Roy's Largest Root indicating marginal significance (P=.037).

Table 2: Multivariate Test Results (MANOVA) for social media usage frequency

Effect	Test	Value	F	Hypothesis DF	Error DF	P-Value
Intercept	Wilks' Lambda	.059	1583.387	4	398	**< .001**
Usage Frequency	Wilks' Lambda	.938	1.607	16	1216.548	.060
	Pillai's Trace	.063	1.610	16	1604	.059
	Roy's Largest Root	.026	2.580	4	401	.037

Univariate ANOVA and Post-Hoc Comparisons
Given the a priori hypotheses, separate univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were examined for each dependent variable. The results, summarized in Table 3, revealed a statistically significant effect of social media usage frequency only on the perception that platforms prioritize

sensationalism over factual accuracy ($F(4, 401)=2.473$, P=.044, partial η^2=.024). The effect sizes were small, with R² values ranging from .005 to .024, indicating that usage frequency explained a minimal proportion of variance in these perceptions. The effects on perceptions of compromised journalistic practices (P=.178), difficulty distinguishing reliable news (P=.748), and lower comparative credibility (P=.081) were not statistically significant at the .05 level.

Table 3: Tests of between-subjects effects (ANOVA) Summary

Dependent Variable	F(4, 401)	p-value	Partial η²	R²
Prioritizes sensationalism over accuracy	2.473	**.044**	.024	.024
Journalistic practices compromised	1.583	.178	.016	.016
Harder to distinguish reliable news	0.483	.748	.005	.005
Less credible than traditional news	2.096	.081	.020	.020

To understand the nature of the significant effect on sensationalism and explore other notable patterns, parameter estimates were examined using "Very Frequently" as the reference category (Table 4). Respondents who "Never" use social media for news perceived significantly less prioritization of sensationalism (B=-0.559, P=.009) compared to "Very Frequent" users. Furthermore, "Sometimes" users reported a stronger belief that journalistic practices are compromised (B=0.553, P=.017), and "Often" users expressed a stronger belief in the lower comparative credibility of social media news (B=0.569, P=.007), both relative to the "Very Frequently" baseline.

Table 4: Parameter estimates for significant comparisons with 'very frequently' as reference

Dependent Variable	Comparison Group	B (Coefficient)	Std. Error	T	P	95% CI for B
Prioritizes sensationalism	Never	-0.559	0.212	-2.632	.009	[-0.976, -0.141]
Journalistic practices compromised	Sometimes	0.553	0.230	2.407	.017	[0.101, 1.004]
Less credible than traditional	Often	0.569	0.209	2.725	.007	[0.159, 0.980]

Bayesian Correlation Analysis

Bayesian correlation analysis was conducted to quantify the strength and certainty of the relationships between all measured variables. The posterior mean correlations and 95% credible intervals are presented in Table 5. The analysis revealed moderate positive correlations between the key perceptual constructs. Most notably, the perception that social media prioritizes sensationalism correlated positively with the belief that its news is less credible (Mean r=.162, 95% CI [.066, .251]). Similarly, the perception that it is harder to distinguish reliable news correlated with the belief that journalistic practices are compromised (Mean r=.179, 95% CI [.081, .270]).

Crucially, the credible intervals for the correlations between *social media usage frequency* and the four perceptual variables all contained zero, indicating negligible to very weak relationships. The correlation between usage frequency and perceived difficulty distinguishing news was near zero (Mean r=-.026, 95% CI [-.124, .067]), as was the correlation with perceived compromised journalism (Mean r=-.039, 95% CI [-.137, .057]) and lower credibility (Mean r=.016, 95% CI [-.084, .112]). A slightly positive but weak correlation existed with perceived sensationalism (Mean r=.133, 95% CI [.040, .227]).

Table 5: Bayesian pairwise correlations: Posterior means and 95% credible intervals

Variable Pair	Posterior Mean (r)	95% Credible Interval
Sensationalism ↔ Less credible news	.162	[.066, .251]
Harder to distinguish news ↔ Journalistic practices compromised	.179	[.081, .270]
Less credible news ↔ Harder to distinguish news	.137	[.042, .232]
Less credible news ↔ Journalistic practices compromised	.118	[.023, .214]
Sensationalism ↔ Frequency of use	.133	[.040, .227]
Less credible news ↔ Frequency of use	.016	[-.084, .112]
Harder to distinguish news ↔ Frequency of use	-.026	[-.124, .067]
Journalistic practices compromised ↔ Frequency of use	-.039	[-.137, .057]

The posterior distributions for the most salient correlations, illustrating both the interconnectedness of public perceptions and their decoupling from usage frequency, are visualized in Figures 1-4 see appendix. Figure 1 and Figure 2 depict the moderate positive correlations between perceptual constructs. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the posterior distributions for the correlations between usage frequency and two key perceptions, both sharply peaked near zero, providing visual confirmation of the weak relationships reported in Table 5.
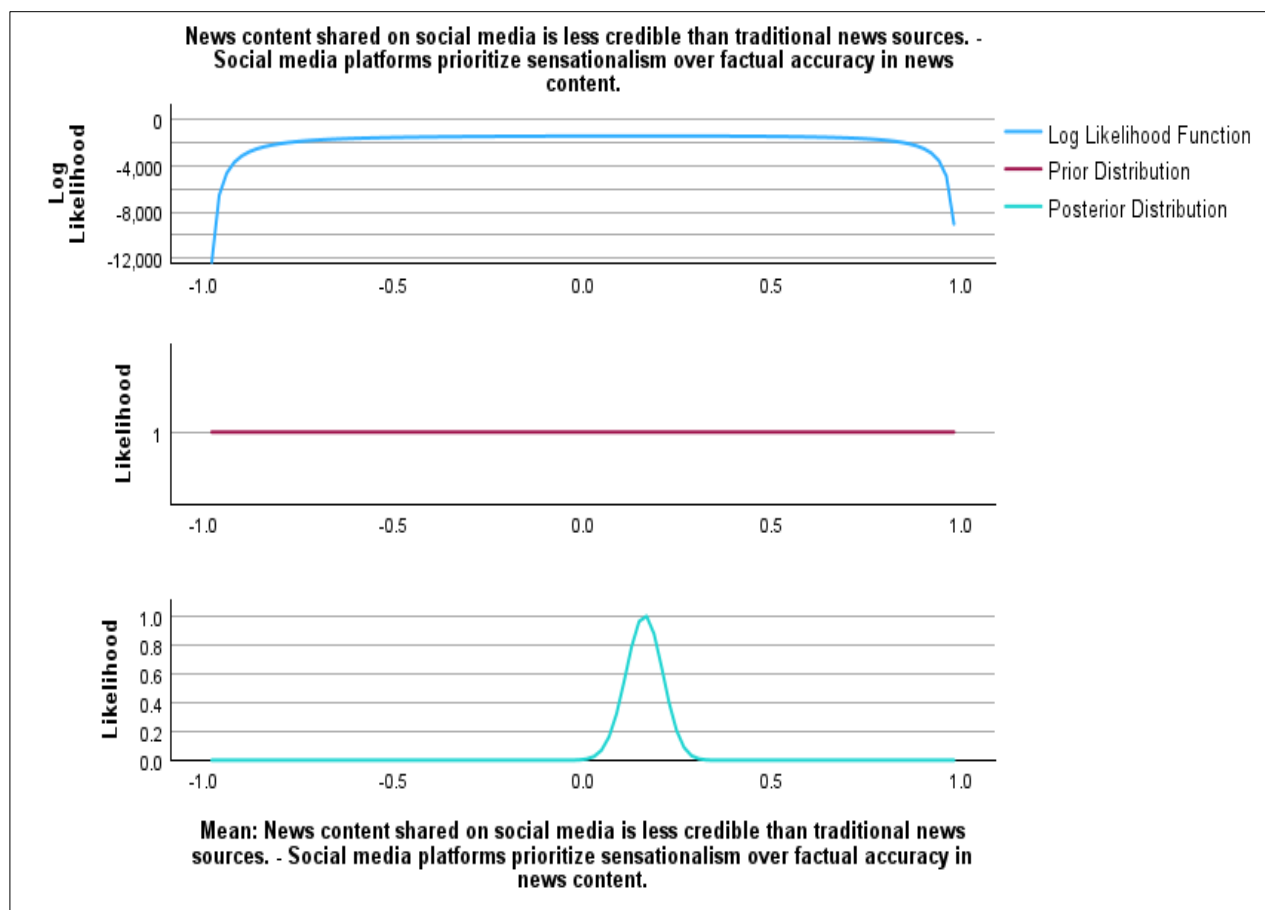
Fig 1: Bayesian posterior distribution for the correlation between perceptions of lower social media news credibility and higher sensationalism (Posterior Mean r=.162, 95% CI [.066, .251])
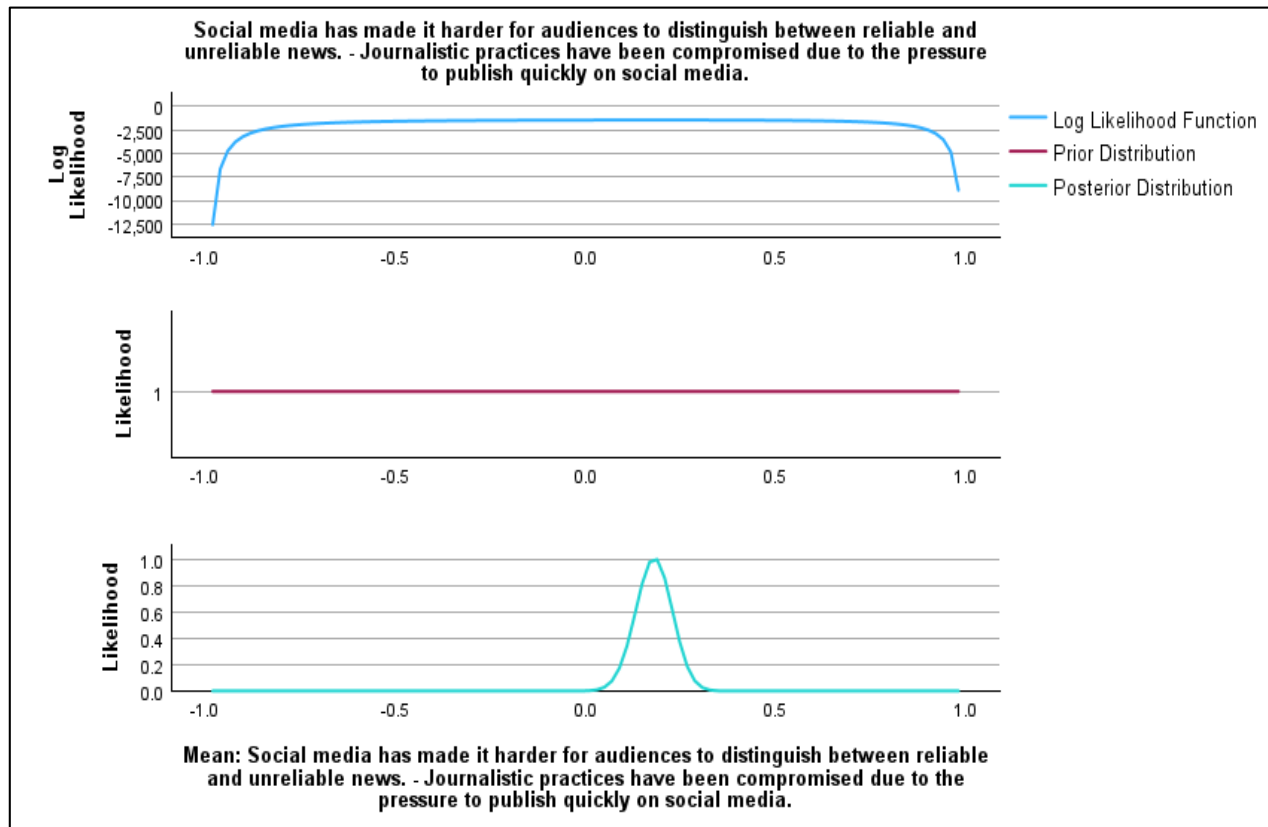

Fig 2: Bayesian posterior distribution for the correlation between perceptions of difficulty distinguishing reliable news and compromised journalistic integrity (Posterior Mean r=.179, 95% CI [.081, .270])
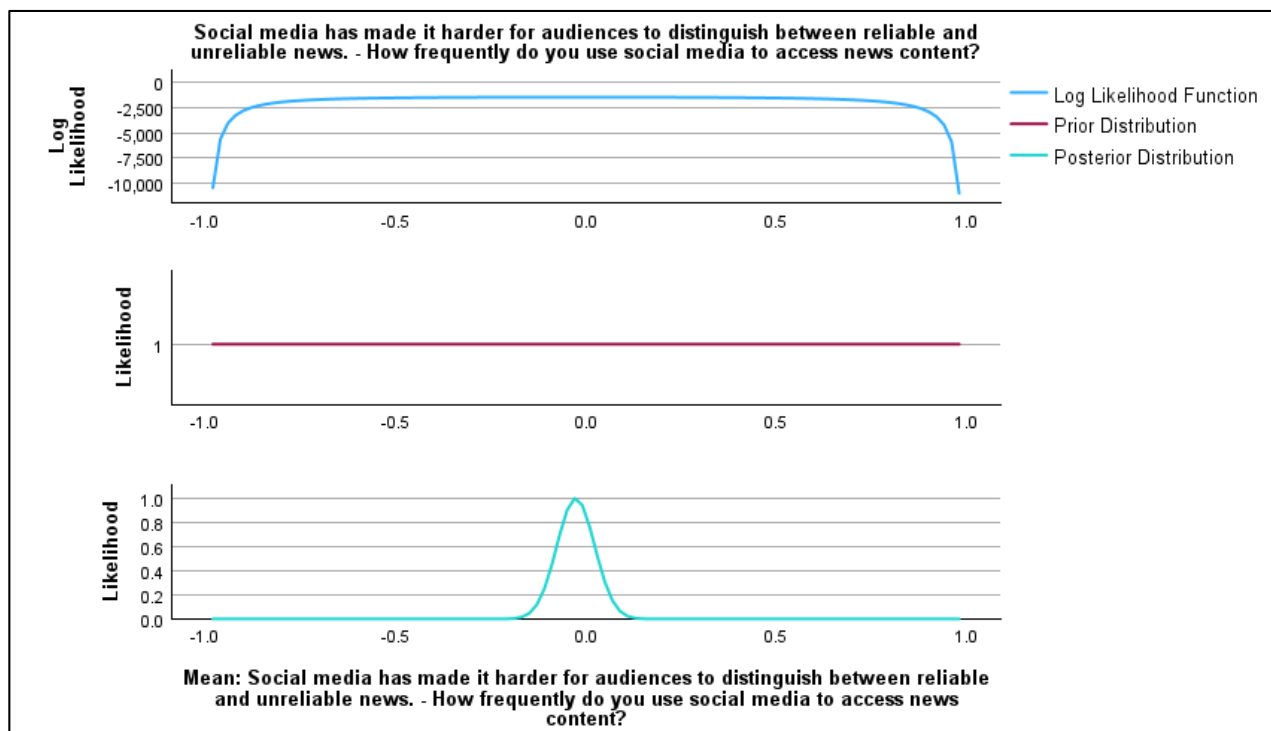
Fig 3: Bayesian posterior distribution for the correlation between social media usage frequency and perception of difficulty distinguishing reliable news (Posterior Mean r=-.026, 95% CI [-.124, .067]).
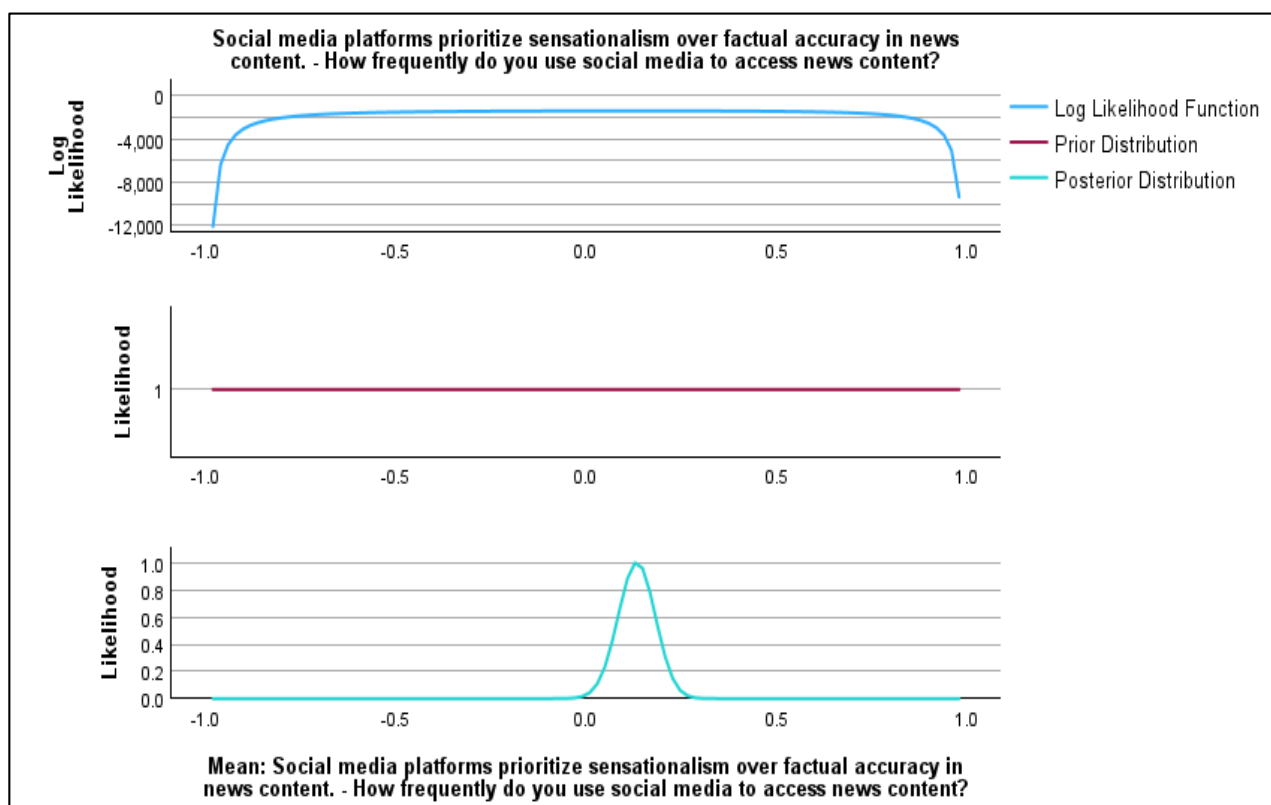

Fig 4: Bayesian posterior distribution for the correlation between social media usage frequency and perception of sensationalism (Posterior Mean r=.133, 95% CI [.040, .227]).

Hypothesis Testing Summary
Based on the statistical analyses

- **H$_{a1}$ (Sensationalism):** Supported. Social media usage frequency had a significant, though small, effect on perceptions of sensationalism (P=.044).

- **H$_{a2}$ (Journalistic Integrity):** Not supported. No significant effect of usage frequency was found (P=.178).

- **H$_{a3}$ (Difficulty Distinguishing News):** Not supported. No significant effect of usage frequency was found (P=.748).

- **H$_{a4}$ (Credibility vs. Traditional News):** Marginally supported but not statistically significant at α=.05 (P=.081).
- **Main H$_a$:** Partially supported. While a significant relationship exists for sensationalism perceptions, the data do not support a broad, significant negative impact of social media usage frequency on perceptions of news credibility and reliability across all measured dimensions. Bayesian correlations further confirm that usage frequency has negligible direct relationships with these perceptual outcomes.

Discussion

This study sought to quantitatively examine how the frequency of social media use for news shapes public perceptions of credibility, sensationalism, and journalistic integrity. The findings reveal a critical and paradoxical insight: while public perceptions of social media's negative influence on news are coherent and interrelated, they are largely decoupled from an individual's intensity of use. This suggests that critiques of social media news have become a form of widespread public consciousness an ambient awareness rather than a belief system that scales directly with personal consumption habits.

The most statistically clear finding was the significant effect of usage frequency on perceptions of sensationalism (H$_{a1}$ supported). This aligns with the theoretical framework of second-level agenda-setting (Framing), which posits that media influence how people think about issues by making certain attributes salient (Entman, 1993; McCombs *et al.*, 1997) [5]. The architecture of social media platforms, driven by engagement algorithms, demonstrably frames news through a lens of emotional resonance and controversy, a dynamic described as "affective news cycles" (Papacharissi, 2014) [18]. Our data indicate that increased exposure to this environment makes the "sensationalism frame" more perceptible. This is visually corroborated by Figure 4, which shows a weak positive trend between usage frequency and sensationalism perceptions. More importantly, the moderate positive correlation between perceived sensationalism and perceived low credibility (r=.162, Figure 1) confirms that this frame is intrinsically linked to credibility assessments in the public mind, empirically validating a key concern in the literature regarding the trust gap between traditional and social media (Fotopoulos, 2023; Siddaraju, 2024) [6, 21].

However, the central contribution of this study lies in what the Bayesian analyses reveal. Figures 3 and 4, along with the negligible correlation coefficients in Table 5, demonstrate that the relationships between usage frequency and perceptions of compromised journalism, difficulty distinguishing news, and lower comparative credibility are statistically inconsequential. This directly leads to the rejection of H$_{a2}$ and H$_{a3}$, and the weak support for H$_{a4}$. This decoupling is theoretically significant. From a Gatekeeping Theory perspective (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) [20, 12], the public broadly acknowledges the failure of algorithmic and social "gatewatching" (Bruns, 2018) [4] to ensure quality, as seen in the overall agreement that social media news is less credible. Yet, this judgment is not a product of how often one passes through this compromised gate. It appears to be a societal-level verdict on the gate's condition, absorbed through broader media discourse and public conversation, creating what Hermida (2010) [9] terms an "ambient awareness" of the issue. This finding

complements qualitative research showing that even young, frequent users who trust specific creators maintain a baseline, platform-wide skepticism and employ verification rituals (Horning, 2024) [10].

The non-linear patterns uncovered in the parameter estimates further complicate a simple narrative. The finding that "Never" users report the lowest perception of sensationalism is intuitive. However, the observation that "Sometimes" and "Often" users exhibit the highest levels of concern about compromised journalism and lower credibility, compared to "Very Frequent" users, suggests a nuanced relationship. Very frequent users may develop familiarity, curated feeds, or trust in specific partisan or creator-based sources that inoculate them against broader platform-level skepticism. In contrast, moderate users may be positioned as critical observers—engaged enough to see the platform's flaws but not so embedded as to normalize them. This challenges simplistic linear models of media effects and highlights the need for more granular research into user typologies and platform literacies.

This study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design prohibits causal inference; we cannot determine if usage shapes perceptions or if pre-existing perceptions influence usage patterns. The use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study measures perceptions of difficulty distinguishing news, not actual media literacy performance. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to trace co-evolution of use and perceptions, incorporate behavioral measures of news discernment, and use representative sampling. Qualitative follow-ups are essential to explore the reasoning behind the non-linear patterns among different user groups, particularly the critical stance of moderate users and the relative acceptance of very frequent users. Finally, integrating platform-specific metrics (e.g., time spent, types of content engaged with) could provide a more precise picture than general frequency measures.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that public concerns about sensationalism, credibility erosion, and journalistic compromise in the social media news environment are strongly interlinked, forming a coherent critique. However, an individual's frequency of consumption is a poor predictor of their adherence to this critique. This paradox indicates that the primary impact of social media on public trust may not be a straightforward, dose-dependent erosion among its heaviest users. Instead, it appears to have contributed to a generalized, widely disseminated climate of skepticism—a shared ambient awareness of its problematic role in the information ecosystem. The transformation of gatekeeping and the dominant framing of news through sensationalism have generated a public discourse about media quality that has permeated society, transcending individual consumption habits. This underscores the need for media literacy and regulatory interventions that address this pervasive climate of distrust, rather than focusing solely on the behaviors of the most active users.

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