Trust in a Digital World

The Roles of Media Trust and Ordinary Citizen Cues in Online Disinformation's Credibility

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The perception of disinformation as societal risk has reached a troubling peak amid the COVID-19 pandemic, strategically targeting vulnerable audiences through digital media by mirroring characteristics of vox populi disinformation. This study investigates the conditions under which COVID-19-related disinformation referring to a polarized (refugees) and neutral (runners) out-group appears most credible. In the early stages of the pandemic, we conducted a pre-registered online survey experiment with a representative German sample (N = 1,117). Results indicated that those with low trust in the media judged subtle and completely fabricated types of disinformation as more credible than accurate information. Presenting the article as a social media post from an ordinary user, rather than an official source, had no discernible impact on credibility evaluations; participants accurately assessed the credibility of a random source. We conclude that people are generally able to recognize disinformation—unless they already mistrust the media. This paper addresses why disinformation triggers strong reactions in targeted groups and how it thrives in the participatory digital landscape.

Key words: disinformation, COVID-19, experiments, source credibility, media trust

1. Introduction

The spread of disinformation received growing attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, described as an 'infodemic' by the World Health Organization. Disinformation—purposefully deceptive and false information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)—alters facts to sway elections or disrupt social cohesion and exploits digital infrastructures to reach small, susceptible audiences. These campaigns often rely on pre-existing social biases, making fake references to the people and involving citizens as opinion leaders (Baribi-Bartov et al., 2024; Starbird, 2019). Studies suggest the source of information and the level of trust citizens have in specific sources are closely tied to the effectiveness of disinformation (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). When people tend to distrust established information presented in the media, they may be drawn to disinformation narratives that cultivate distrust in established information (e.g., Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). Given that disinformation often contains delegitimizing narratives attacking the media and established truth claims (e.g., Hameleers, 2020), this study focuses on the effects of disinformation depending on media trust and

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source features. Using experimental data from Germany (N = 1,117), we explore the role of ordinary source references and media trust in assessing the credibility of disinformation about a polarized (refugees) and neutral (runners) out-group.

Disinformation campaigns use digital strategies to reach susceptible audiences (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), e.g., through targeted advertising (Kim et al., 2018). Targeted disinformation is distributed by various actors that mimic engagement (Dawson & Innes, 2019) and empower citizens to share disinformation with their networks (Buchanan & Benson, 2019). Disinformation exploits decreasing levels of institutional trust, with citizens circulating false information from public and media authorities (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'information disorder' revealed that while most people turned to trustworthy sources (Altay et al., 2022; Simon & Camargo, 2021), a growing minority drifted away from the mainstream (Schultz et al., 2023). A critical question concerns the conditions under which fabricated information appears credible to some groups but not to others (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). These conditions are related to social contexts influencing how citizens process information. Drawing on communication science and psychology, we focus on source-related cues that bias credibility assessments and are strategic components of disinformation campaigns. Specifically, we explore an ordinary citizen cue as a message-related factor and media trust as a dispositional factor. By gaining insights into the persuasiveness of disinformation, we aim to enhance the effectiveness of interventions to mitigate such campaigns.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Reasons People Accept (False) Information

Disinformation is a subtype of misinformation created deliberately for political or financial agendas (Tandoc et al., 2018). Some citizens may accept it as legitimate, altering their perceptions of reality and moving away from a common factual ground (Ecker et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, false information has increased public cynicism and distrust towards measures suggested by political elites (Nielsen et al., 2020). Disinformation, though not new, now reinforces growing distrust and hate across countries and cultures (Altay et al., 2023). Despite challenges in manipulating the intention behind a message in experimental designs (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021), we refer to disinformation based on its disruptive modus operandi, often involving distrustful and moralizing narratives.

Accepting information as credible is the first step in processing content (Tandoc et al., 2018). Here, credibility is "an individual's judgment of the veracity of communication content" (Appelman & Sundar, 2016, p. 63). People can navigate their information environment well and judge credibility based on knowledge-coherence or consistent argumentation (Lee & Shin, 2021; Schaewitz et al., 2020). However, limited cognitive capacities sometimes lead to missing inconsistencies, especially without prior knowledge. This aligns with cognitive information processing theories (Pennycook & Rand, 2019), where people may mistakenly evaluate information as authentic (Sundar et al., 2007).

Outside of laboratory experiments, people often perceive information within a context aligned with their prior beliefs or those of similar sources. To reduce information overload, they tend to select and process attitude-consistent information (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Political preferences in the message or source may trigger motivated reasoning (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020), leading people to accept attitude-consistent information to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Here, people compare new information to biased prior knowledge. Attitudes drive misinformation processing in various contexts (Ecker et

al., 2022). In the German context, politicized and distrustful issues like anti-immigration have been targets of disinformation campaigns (Humprecht, 2019).

The motivated reasoning argument aligns with the community-based effects of mis- and disinformation (Guess et al., 2020), where people accept information because it resonates with pre-existing beliefs, regardless of its veracity. Some citizens accept information based on political cues that align with their beliefs. However, the same source cue may lead political opponents to reject the same information. The aim of this study is to untangle trust-related factors influencing disinformation credibility perceptions. Here, gray-area content that is misleading rather than factually inaccurate often appears more credible and shows stronger effects (Allen et al., 2024). Therefore, we vary the degree of facticity and include subtle and more extreme types of disinformation to assess hypotheses in a realistic information environment.

2.2 Ordinary Citizens as Vox Populi

Having to navigate through the amount of information available online, people rely on the source as a shortcut to decide whether a message is credible (Brashier & Marsh, 2020). Research consistently shows people are persuaded by familiar or identifiable social contacts (Nekmat et al., 2019; Housholder & LaMarre, 2014), such as political figures (Swire et al., 2017). People tend to cluster with similar others, sharing social foci or experiences (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954), like partisan identity (Traberg et al., 2024). Credibility is attributed to similar or trusted sources (Sundar et al., 2007). A credible source can obscure inconsistencies in mis- and disinformation (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021), especially politically congruent sources (Traberg & van der Linden, 2022). Information seems most credible and less likely to raise suspicion when it comes from within people's social groups.

Disinformation relies on collaborative distribution, faking civic engagement with, for instance, troll armies (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Dawson & Innes, 2019) and a small population of ordinary superspreaders (Baribi-Bartov et al., 2024). Being spread by actors opposed to official sources and empowering other citizens to share (Buchanan & Benson, 2019), disinformation may appear as *vox populi* (Lukito et al., 2020; Starbird, 2019). This concept is also called "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (Giglietto et al., 2020; Starbird, 2019). When people see ordinary sources engage with a post on social media, information may appear authentic to citizens preferring people-centric communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). To mimic the citizen-oriented logic of disinformation campaigns (as opposed to elite-oriented strategies), we show participants disinformation without giving any source cue or disinformation that looks like it is shared by an ordinary user rather than an official source. In addition, a citizen's endorsing comment represents social approval. We hypothesize that source credibility moderates the effect of disinformation on perceived credibility, such that content shared by an ordinary source is perceived as more credible than content without a source cue *(H1).*

2.3 The Importance of Media Trust

Trust is the foundation upon which democratic decision-making is built. Embedded in a complex society, trust can be established on various levels (Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021), including social institutions such as the media (*macro level*), organizations or social groups like refugees (*meso level*), individual relationships or general ideations (*micro level*). Overall trends indicate a decline in institutional trust (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2020), including a drop in general trust in the media (Newman et al., 2020). This erosion is linked to a failure in effective information exchange between politicians, journalists, and the

public (e.g., Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This decline in trust can have a global impact, making individuals more susceptible to misinformation as a negative spillover effect on the credibility of news (Altay et al., 2023; Hameleers, 2023; Scheufele et al., 2020; van der Meer et al., 2023).

The discursive construction of mis- and disinformation and the strong emphasis on this issue in public and media debates may have contributed to uncertainty related to the factual status of conventional information. As such, there is a clear affinity between disinformation and lower levels of trust, especially in established information sources. Exposure to disinformation and its narratives can diminish trust in accurate information by fostering suspicion towards established sources (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022; van der Meer et al., 2023). Societies with diminished trust in established media may gravitate towards disinformation's counter-factual narratives and interpretations of reality.

At the individual level, media trust plays a significant role in how people process and evaluate information. To varying degrees, trust in the media influences how individuals evaluate the credibility of information (Otto et al., 2018). Individuals who trust the media have confidence in media institutions to deliver accurate and relevant information in a reliable manner (Coleman, 1990) by, among other things, adhering to journalistic standards (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). This general media trust refers to trust in established media institutions and practices and functions as a predictor of (selective) media use and may also moderate media effects (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022; Wise & McLaughlin, 2016). When trust in the media is high, individuals are more likely to believe information from official sources and to choose media that aligns with their, mostly moderate, worldviews. These trustful individuals are generally better equipped to recognize disinformation, as their existing knowledge and worldviews are often incompatible with false content. Conversely, moderate levels of trust are seen as conducive to democracy as citizens should not blindly accept the accuracy and veracity of all information they are exposed to. Being skeptical can also be associated with more openness to information, a critical assessment of the veracity of information, and the willingness to verify information when in doubt (e.g., Hameleers, 2020).

In Germany, media trust has been stable at the aggregate level, however, the number of people distrusting established media has slightly increased (Schultz et al., 2023). When trust in the media is hampered, people turn away from established information sources while being more open to alternative claims in disinformation that often delegitimatizes conventional information. Skepticism towards established media sources is particularly prevalent among those with lower levels of media trust, often with higher education and a preference for online news consumption (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). These individuals are more inclined to seek attitude-congruent content, including alternative media and misinformation (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022), again, negatively affecting media trust levels in a downward spiral (Valenzuela et al., 2022). Consequently, people with low media trust often have a cynical outlook on both the perceived honesty and accuracy of established news reporting (e.g., Strömbäck et al., 2020), which makes them more open to accept information coming from non-established information sources that cast doubt on narratives disseminated by mainstream media (Benkler et al., 2018). As a result, people become more receptive to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, regardless of its veracity (e.g., Ladd, 2010; Lee, 2010), thus perpetuating hyper-partisan and distrustful worldviews (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). As a consequence of acquired misperceptions, this reliance on pre-existing attitudes may correspond with a lower likelihood of detecting non-validated claims and inconsistencies in arguments, even when based on political knowledge (Humprecht et al., 2020; Staender et al., 2022).

Taken together, low trust in the media may crucially influence the way that individuals evaluate the credibility of disinformation in two ways (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). First, participants with low media trust tend to reject mainstream media and select more alternative sources that propagate content similarly to the disinformation in our experiment. Second, participants with low media trust have a higher need to trust sources that confirm their worldviews (Benkler et al., 2018), such that their reliance on motivated reasoning may be elevated. Hence, we focus on disinformation narratives that oppose and delegitimize established truth claims on issues salient in society. These narratives should be most congruent for people demonstrating lower trust in the media, as their beliefs are most likely to align with the alternative truth claims presented in disinformation (e.g., Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). We propose our hypothesis arguing that media trust moderates the effect of disinformation on perceived credibility (*H2*), such that participants with lower media trust perceive disinformation as more credible than participants with higher media trust.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

Real articles about the coronavirus were manipulated to represent different types of (dis)information: accurate, misleading, fabricated. Each participant was randomly exposed to two articles, one on refugees (a politicized topic) and another on runners (a neutral topic), corresponding to one of three degrees of veracity. Additionally, a source cue made the articles appear to be posted by a familiar social media user, manipulating both the source cue and the environment. The experiment followed a between-subjects design: 3 (disinformation: accurate vs. misleading vs. fabricated) × 2 (source cue: absent vs. present). The topic served as a within-subjects robustness check and was not statistically compared.

All procedures received ethical approval from the university's ethical review board. Participants gave their informed consent and they were able to withdraw from the study at any stage. In addition, because research can impact conspiracy endorsement (Clifford & Sullivan, 2023), participants were debriefed about the information they were exposed to in the experiment using elaborate fact-checks and explanations.

3.2 Sample

In July 2020, a representative sample of German citizens was recruited using a hard quota on age, gender, and education (for exclusion criteria, see Table S1 in supplementary information at https://osf.io/d2vry/?view_only=258496f8129746d081fc51ffe544b1c6) via the research agency Respondi. The final sample included in the analyses consisted of 1,117 respondents, of which 52.5 % were female and 47.5 % male. On average, the sample was 51 years old (SD = 16) and represented the population in terms of education: 38.5 % had a low level of education, 29.5 % had a moderate level, and 31.7 % had a high level of education (sample composition in Table S2).

3.3 Stimuli

Each participant was exposed to two COVID-19 articles containing accurate, misleading, or fabricated information. The misleading article presented the same facts as the accurate one but out of context, while the fabricated article completely invented interpretations unrelated to the authentic news (see SI for details). The stimuli were based on Brennen et al.'s (2020) investigation of COVID-19 misinformation.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the disinformation conditions—presented with or without a source cue. For the participants who were exposed to one of the conditions including a citizen cue, the stimuli were altered to mimic a social media post made by a white male with an average German name. The text of the posts was consistent across conditions: the user endorsed the article about refugees by judging it as information that reveals what is actually going on (*Finally, an article about the coronavirus that shows us where we stand in this crisis—a must-read!*), while the neutral article about runners received a more subdued endorsement (*You should read this article about the coronavirus*). This endorsement served as a cue for social approval (see supplementary information for examples).

Participants were further instructed to imagine that the citizen posting the article was a familiar source, such as a friend or family member. To prevent bias from the quantified reactions typical of social media posts, the posts were presented without the number of likes or comments, which somewhat compromised external validity. Given the challenge of tailoring posts to each participant's social network outside of natural experiments, participants were specifically asked to imagine the citizen posting the article was a friend or family member. This method allowed participants to connect the source cues to their own social groups, as we cannot tailor the presentation of the source based on the recipient in an experimental design. Although this approach is less realistic than matching the source to the self-perceived identity of each recipient, the experimental design's limitations required relying on participants' own connections to source cues based on their identities.

3.4 Dependent Variables

Perceived credibility was measured right after exposure to the different stimuli. For both topics, 7-point agreement scales (strongly agree—strongly disagree) about the accuracy of the article measured the perceived credibility (refugees: M = 4.01, SD = 1.53, Cronbach's α = .95; runners: M = 3.91, SD = 1.63, Cronbach's α = .97; see Figure S1 for group means). The scale consists of four statements per topic (*The message is inaccurate*, *The message is completely false*, *The message contains fake news, The message contains false information*). We reverse-coded the items as they were framed negatively, denying the truth value of the rated information. Instead of asking participants to assess the truthfulness or accuracy of the information (Schaewitz et al., 2020), the scale focused on the perceived lack of truth value. However, as we measured the same dependent variable for the disinformation and true information presented in the control condition, this measurement allowed for an assessment of the relative credibility of the different conditions to which participants were exposed.

3.5 Moderators

To measure media trust, we employed multidimensional scales encompassing various levels of analysis. Participants were asked to indicate their trust in different media types for coronavirus-related information, including newspapers, TV, radio news, and their online and offline formats (M = 4.08, SD = 1.49, Cronbach's α = .95). A separate set of questions focused on specific German legacy media outlets (ARD News, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Welt, Spiegel Online) (M = 4.45, SD = 1.59, Cronbach's a = .96).

Additionally, trust in journalists was measured (M = 3.85, SD = 1.53). Participants also assessed the trustworthiness of traditional media coverage on specific issues using a five-item scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very trustworthy* (7). The topics covered included unemployment, crime, climate change, immigration, traditions, values, and identity (M = 4.21, SD = 1.45, Cronbach's α = .95).

Following this multi-level framework suggested by Strömbäck et al. (2020), and taking different dimensions of media trust into account, we computed an aggregate score per participant, Cronbach's α = .97. Participants judged media institutions as trustworthy, indicating moderate to high levels of media trust (M = 4.24, SD = 1.36).

3.6 Manipulation Checks

A manipulation check for each disinformation condition was conducted by asking whether statements were made in the articles (yes/no). The statements were tailored to the conditions (see questions in supplementary information). Participants sufficiently recognized both disinformation stimuli (refugees: 81 % accurate; runners: 77.5 % accurate). Chi-square proportions tests with significance testing showed that the proportion of correct answers was significantly higher than incorrect answers ($p < .001$). Participants were not excluded based on failed post-treatment manipulation checks as post-treatment conditioning may bias the sample due to unobserved confounders (Montgomery et al., 2018).

3.7 Pre-Registration and Deviations

This article builds on data from an online survey experiment that was divided into two papers (Hameleers et al., 2021). The primary focus of this analysis is to present one half of the pre-registered hypothesis that explores a different facet of how German citizens respond to disinformation. The pre-registration details for this study can be accessed at: https://osf.io/49vk3/?view_only=296e6236af13405bad5e4859474eaa32, while the code and supplementary information are available at: https://osf.io/d2vry/?view_only=258496f8129746d081fc51ffe544b1c6.

We deviated from the pre-registration in two ways: First, the pre-registration inaccurately describes the second factor as varying "corrective information: present versus absent", while it mentions the citizen cue only as randomization. Instead, the second factor was the citizen cue, resulting in six conditions that participants were randomly assigned to. Every participant received a fact-checking debrief tailored to the condition. Second, the pre-registration splits H2 into H2a and H2b, testing the effects of media trust on participants with lower vs. higher media trust. We found this division to be confusing and opted to consolidate the hypothesis into a single statement, examining media trust as a moderating factor on credibility perceptions instead.

4. Results

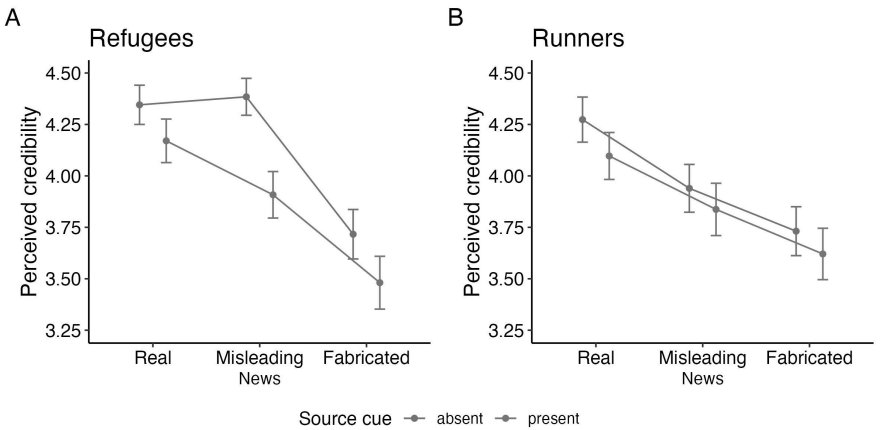
To test H1 and H2, we conducted two separate OLS regression models predicting perceived credibility from exposure to disinformation (accurate/misleading/fabricated) per topic (refugees/runners). The claim that the addition (compared to the absence of) a citizen source cue made disinformation more credible (*H1*) was not supported by the data. The interaction between exposure to disinformation and the citizen cue was not significant (see Table 1). A source cue slightly decreased the perceived credibility of all news types but when comparing the conditions to one another, the differences are not significantly different. Thus, no evidence for the effect of the source cue was found.

When disentangling the effects of source cues for each facticity condition (accurate, misleading, fabricated), we see patterns for misleading disinformation on refugees and runners (see figure 1). All types of information on refugees were perceived as more credible when a source cue was absent (vs. present) with fabricated disinformation being perceived as less credible than other types of information. Interestingly, the credibility of misleading

Table 1: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model predicting the credibility of misleading and completely fabricated disinformation from the source cue

	Refugees				**Runners**			
	B (SE)	*t*	*95 % CI*	*p*	*B (SE)*	*t*	*95 % CI*	*p*
(Constant)	4.35 (.11)	38.53	4.12, 4.57	<.001	4.27 (.12)	34.94	4.03, 4.51	<.001
Misleading [accurate]	0.04 (.15)	0.25	-0.48, 0.13	.800	-0.33 (.17)	-2.00	-0.66, -0.01	.046
Fabricated [accurate]	-0.63 (.16)	-4.04	-0.93, -0.32	<.001	-0.54 (.17)	-3.21	-0.87, -0.21	**.001**
Source cue	-0.17 (.16)	-1.12	-0.48,0.13	.262	-0.18 (.17)	-1.05	-0.51, 0.16	.296
Source cue × misleading	-0.30 (.22)	-1.37	-0.73, 0.13	.171	0.07 (.24)	0.31	-0.39, 0.54	.755
Source cue × fabricated	-0.16 (.22)	-0.28	-0.49, 0.37	.782	0.07 (.24)	0.28	-0.4, 0.53	.781
F(5,1111)			11.02	**<.001**			4.00	**.001**
R^2 / R^2 adjusted			0.047 /	0.043			0.018/	0.013
N				1117				1117

Figure 1: Presence vs. absence of an ordinary citizen cue for refugees (left) and runners (right) with group means and standard errors



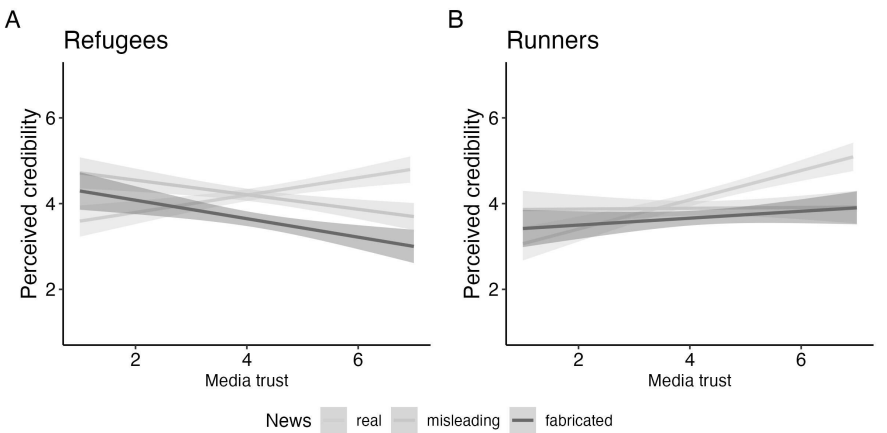
disinformation seems to suffer from the source cue. The differences between conditions change for runners. Here, misleading disinformation on runners and COVID-19 was perceived as slightly more credible when the source cue was present. However, none of these observations were statistically significant.

We had expected that media trust moderated the perceived credibility of disinformation (*H2*), such that participants with higher media trust report lower credibility in response to disinformation and that participants with lower media trust report higher credibility for disinformation. We found support for this hypothesis (see Table 2). For misleading disinformation on refugees, media trust was negatively associated with perceived credibility (B = -0.37, $p < .001$). Here, for fabricated disinformation, the effect was even more substantial (B = -0.42, $p < .001$). This pattern was reversed for runners, with slightly less pronounced effects (misleading: B = -0.33, $p < .001$; fabricated: B = -0.26, p = .003). Overall, people with higher media trust perceived disinformation as less credible than people with lower

Table 2: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model predicting the credibility of misleading and completely fabricated disinformation from media trust

	Refugees				**Runners**			
	B (SE)	*t*	*95 % CI*	*p*	*B (SE)*	*t*	*95 % CI*	*p*
(Constant)	3.39 (.26)	13.22	2.89, 3.89	<.001	2.72 (.28)	9.83	2.18, 3.27	<.001
Misleading [accurate]	1.50 (.36)	4.18	0.80, 2.20	<.001	1.13 (.39)	2.92	0.37, 1.89	.004
Fabricated [accurate]	1.12 (.36)	3.15	0.42, 1.82	.002	0.61 (.39)	1.59	-0.14, 1.37	.111
Media trust	0.20 (.06)	3.54	0.09, 0.31	<.001	0.34 (.06)	5.51	0.22, 0.46	<.001
Media trust × misleading	-0.37 (.08)	-4.64	-0.53, -0.22	<.001	-0.33 (.09)	-3.83	-0.50, -0.16	<.001
Media trust × fabricated	-0.42 (.08)	-5.22	-0.58, -0.26	<.001	-0.26 (.09)	-3.01	-0.43, -0.09	.003
$F(5,1111)$			15.89	**<.001**			10.16	**<.001**
R^2 / R^2 adjusted			0.067 /	0.063			0.044/	0.039
N				1117				1117

Figure 2: Regression lines of perceived credibility by media trust for both stimulus types (A. Refugees, B. Runners) with 95 % confidence intervals



media trust, and vice versa, people with lower media trust perceived disinformation as more credible, confirming *H2*.

Interestingly, the coefficient for the response to the control (accurate) information was positive (see figure 2). Relative to disinformation, higher levels of media trust increase the perceived credibility of accurate information (refugees: $B = 0.20$], $p < .001$; runners: $B = 0.34$, $p < .001$). The reversed pattern contrasts the effects of disinformation, thereby also supporting *H2*.

Although it was not part of our pre-registered analysis plan, we further assessed how trust moderated exposure to the different source cues used in the experiment. Results are displayed in the supplementary information (section 7). There are no significant differences in how the source cue affected credibility across different levels of media trust, showing that the effects of media trust tend to be the same for different presentation formats of disinformation.

5. Discussion

Disinformation has gained new momentum in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Germany, citizens have, for the most part, complied with the policies advised by scientists while following conventional information sources to stay updated about the issue. At the same time, partisan groups have disseminated deceptive narratives and myths explaining the pandemic with alternative anti-elitist narratives and conspiracy theories (Frischlich et al., 2020), propagated through citizen-driven disinformation campaigns online. Attempting to advance the knowledge on the impact of disinformation campaigns in Germany, this study investigated the conditions under which COVID-19 related disinformation referring to polarized and neutral topics appeared most credible, primarily focusing on the role of source credibility and trust in the media.

The results of our online experiment using a representative German sample (N = 1,117) showed that the design of disinformation regarding source presentation and individual-level differences in media trust matter. An ordinary source cue slightly decreased credibility perceptions of accurate, misleading, and fabricated information. However, participants were not more prone to fall for disinformation when such a cue was present (rejecting *H1*). Media trust moderated credibility perceptions (confirming *H2*), such that people judged disinformation more credible when distrustful of the media. This was the case for both topics, albeit more pronounced for the polarized issue (refugees). There was no interaction between the source cue and media trust.

However, the effects of source cues and media trust found in this experiment were inconsistent based on the degree of facticity. In response to the article on runners, the difference between accurate and misleading information was small. Here, the absence of the migration cue may have led more people to accept subtle disinformation, not triggering any reason to question the information based on prior beliefs.

More specifically, subtle disinformation that does not refer to polarizing or politicized interpretations may be less likely to trigger suspicion, causing people to rely on the realism heuristic offered by seemingly authentic news reporting on COVID-19. However, when the source cue was absent, misleading disinformation on refugees seemed more credible than accurate information. These results are in line with prior research showing that more subtle, misleading or biased content may be more damaging than blatant disinformation (Altay et al., 2023; Hameleers et al., 2021).

We found that media trust moderates the effects of the stimuli on credibility perceptions, i.e., participants with low media trust judged both types of disinformation as more credible than accurate information, while this judgment flips when media trust is high. Moreover, the effect of media trust on credibility perceptions was the strongest for fabricated and misleading disinformation about refugees. Taken together, these findings hint at motivated-reasoning processing. Misperceptions are incredibly persistent to correction when they align with prior beliefs (Ecker et al., 2022; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Source and political cues may activate motivated reasoning through systematic, analytical cognitive strategies, such that the stronger the identification with an out-group or political cue (Bakker et al., 2020) and the more political the context (Groenendyk & Krupnikov, 2021; Kahan, 2013), the higher the motivation to process and protect acquired misperceptions.

The persistence of disinformation may adapt to dynamics of a downward spiral once people have lost trust in the media (Valenzuela et al., 2022). Individuals with low trust were extremely prone to disinformation, especially when the presented topic referred to a politicized out-group. Consistent with prior beliefs and amplifying distrust towards social out-groups (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) and the mainstream media (Zimmermann &

Kohring, 2020), this may increase the likelihood of disinformation exposure and acceptance among a specific group of people (Schultz et al., 2023).

While citizen engagement increases the reach of disinformation (Buchanan & Benson, 2019), an ordinary source cue did not affect credibility perceptions. There may be multiple reasons for these null findings. First, we asked participants to imagine the post coming from a familiar source. Participants may have failed to create that link to their own identity and like-minded group members. Still, we want to highlight that the source cue stimuli represent a random, yet ordinary, citizen instead of a political or institutional source (in line with research on ordinary superspreaders, e.g., Baribi-Bartov et al., 2024).

Additionally, users are often exposed to anonymous news recommenders due to algorithmic selection (e.g., Kim et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the presence of an unfamiliar source (compared to no source at all) did not make a considerable difference in their credibility evaluations. Characteristics of the strength of the source tie may have outweighed the article's truthfulness (Kaiser et al., 2021), such that disinformation is more credible when it comes from familiar contacts and, conversely, is more likely to be shared among them. Recent research shows that source cues are only successful when the source is either high in credibility or from the political in-group (Traberg et al., 2024). This null-result sheds a positive light on people's vigilance, as it seems unlikely that they would believe a random social media user, for example, a social bot—not even when they were explicitly asked to imagine it to be a familiar source.

Second, the article was shared by a white male, therefore, 52.5 % of females in our sample may not have considered this person an in-group member. Future research should systematically compare disinformation from an in- vs. out-group member. We suggest that future research should explore more nuanced and externally valid manipulations of source cues. Specifically, such studies could enhance the realism of source cues by matching them more closely to participants' self-identified characteristics or by allowing participants to choose a source they perceive as aligning with their own beliefs. Although this would compromise internal validity, it could offer a closer match to the profile of participants and the source cues used.

Moreover, mimicking a post on social media in the ordinary citizen condition allows us to test two different perception scenarios. However, it compromises the external validity of the study. In reality, people's information environments are much more diverse, they switch between social media platforms and other news media. Even on social media, they receive information coming from individual users they follow or established news sources, sometimes even with different political leanings. This implies that each post comes with a source cue. Therefore, exposing participants to specific pieces of information—with or without a random source—in an experiment creates an artificial scenario. Ideally, such a study could be improved by tracking what people actively choose to engage with in their browsers or what they are exposed to in their feeds, for example, by letting them donate data. In addition, participants' trust in social media may have biased their perceptions of the stimuli, such that we may have also implicitly measured trust in social media.

Despite the design of the ordinary citizen cue, further limitations may compromise the study. First, estimates varied across topics, indicating that the results are unlikely to be robust and challenging to transfer to other contexts. The effect of low media trust was more substantial for the articles framing refugees as a social out-group (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017), most likely because anti-immigration is a frequent theme of disinformation that plays into common misperceptions (Humprecht, 2019). Here, we also suggest that future research looks at different dimensions of trust, distrust, and cynicism.

Although it reaches beyond the scope of this paper, it could be expected that more cynical beliefs related to media that, for example, relate to the system-level rejection of established sources, may play a larger role for the credibility of disinformation than low trust based on a critical outlook on the media's role to inform people in an accurate and complete manner. Distinguishing between skeptical and cynical beliefs may be a relevant avenue for future research. Additionally, the generalizability of the study was limited to COVID-19-related news articles in times of a global health crisis. Future research should replicate the experimental design with disinformation related to topics beyond health, perhaps also varying the form of presentation, for instance, comparing a social media post to a newspaper article, or multimodal forms of disinformation (e.g., microtargeted deepfakes; Dobber et al., 2021; Weikmann et al., 2024). While we already investigated multiple factors within a complex experimental design and a large sample, another path of research could look into media trust and disinformation sharing in the wild using linkage or digital trace data.

6. Conclusion

In this study, a specific group of citizens demonstrated a tendency to accept COVID-19 disinformation. Our findings indicate that differences in media trust play a crucial role in determining the perception of information credibility. Taken to the societal level, decreasing levels of trust bear the risk of becoming a joint disruption. Disinformation campaigns that exploit people's vulnerabilities can further fragment social groups and undermine social cohesion. Once trust is lost, it is difficult to restore, and corrective attempts often backfire. This is because people usually have good reasons to form specific beliefs and they rarely fall for false information that does not benefit them. Our research shows that people accept false information not because it is false but because it fits their understanding of who to trust and what to believe, providing citizens with a sense of belonging and reducing the complexity of social reality. The good news is that most people can correctly judge the truthfulness of information—if it aligns with their collective truth.

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