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Unpacking the Precursors of Perceived News Credibility in Social Media Environments: The Interplay of Digital Connections, Source Trustworthiness, and Media Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The growing reliance on social media for news has heightened worries regarding the trustworthiness of information shared via digital platforms. This research analysed the factors influencing perceived news credibility in social media settings by exploring the impact of digital connectivity, source credibility, information quality, frequency of media use, and media engagement among social media users in Malawi. Utilizing a quantitative explanatory cross-sectional approach, data was gathered from 316 participants through a structured questionnaire and evaluated through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results suggest that source reliability, digital connectivity, and frequency of media usage greatly improve media engagement, whereas source reliability, frequency of media usage, and media engagement have a positive impact on perceived news credibility. The quality of information, nonetheless, did not have a notable impact on media engagement. The findings also indicate that media engagement does not serve as a mediator in the connections between the antecedent variables and perceived news credibility. The research highlights the significance of the reliability of sources, the frequency of media use, and user involvement in influencing credibility views in social media news settings. These results add to current debates on digital news usage and offer actionable insights for social media platforms, news entities, and policymakers aiming to enhance public confidence in online news in Malawi and comparable developing country scenarios.

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Introduction

The swift expansion of digital technologies has changed the ways in which news is created, shared, and consumed globally. Social media networks like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp have grown to be essential avenues for people to access, share, and converse about news [1]. In contrast to traditional media, where information is screened by professional gatekeepers, social media allows individuals, organizations, and institutions to produce and share information immediately to vast audiences. These advancements have increased access to information but have also heightened worries about misinformation, disinformation, and the trustworthiness of news shared via online platforms [3]. The credibility of news is an essential aspect that affects the way audiences assess and utilize information [4]. It pertains to how news is regarded as precise, credible, dependable, impartial, and trustworthy [5]. In social media contexts, evaluating credibility is particularly challenging as users come across news from various sources, such as established news outlets, government agencies, influencers, online groups, and regular users [4-6]. As a result, people are increasingly dependent on different informational and social signals to assess the trustworthiness of news content [7].

In Malawi, the digital media environment has grown significantly in the last ten years, enhancing chances for online news access and community involvement [8]. While traditional media, especially radio and television, continue to be vital information sources, social media has emerged as a more prominent avenue for obtaining and disseminating news [9]. To adapt to evolving audience consumption habits, conventional television broadcasters in Malawi like MBC TV, Times TV, Zodiak TV, Mibawa TV, and Luntha TV have incorporated social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and various digital channels into their broadcasting approaches [10]. These platforms enable broader audience engagement, content distribution, live broadcasting, and interactive participation with viewers, thus enhancing the connection between broadcasters and audiences in the digital media landscape.

Even with this increase, the usage of social media for news is still inconsistent among the population. As per Afrobarometer's Round 10 Survey, 14.1% of Malawians stated they receive news via social media daily, whereas 68.6% noted they never utilize social media for news access [11]. Notable differences were seen between urban and rural populations, along with variations between genders, emphasizing ongoing disparities in digital accessibility and news consumption [12]. Concurrently, the rising reliance on social media for spreading news has intensified worries over misinformation

and the trustworthiness of information [13]. Research in Malawi has recorded the proliferation of false information, especially in domains like public health messaging, political dialogue, and civic involvement [14]. These advancements highlight the importance of grasping how people assess the trustworthiness of news they come across on social media sites. Earlier research has recognized various elements that influence credibility perceptions, such as source reliability, information quality, social impact, media consumption habits, and audience involvement [15-17]. For instance, studies indicate that trust in information sources boosts credibility assessments, whereas high-quality information improves confidence in news content [18]. Additional research, such as [19-21], has shown that social connections and online participation affect how individuals engage with and understand the information disseminated on social media sites. Nonetheless, these elements have frequently been studied in isolation, offering a restricted insight into their combined effect on perceived news credibility [21].

Despite of these advancements, three significant gaps persist. Initially, current research typically examines the factors influencing credibility in isolation rather than as part of a cohesive integrated framework. Secondly, while media engagement has been extensively studied because of social media use, insufficient focus has been placed on its function as a mediating factor that affects how social and informational aspects shape perceptions of credibility. Third, much of the evidence comes from developed-country contexts, restricting comprehension of how credibility is established in developing nations with distinct media infrastructures, digital literacy levels, and social media usage behaviours. These constraints are especially clear in Malawi. Although social media is being used more frequently for news gathering and engagement, there is limited empirical research investigating the factors influencing perceived news credibility. Current research mainly emphasizes misinformation, media usage trends, and information spread, providing minimal understanding of how digital relationships, source reliability, information quality, media consumption frequency, and media involvement collectively influence credibility perceptions. As a result, the ways in which social, informational, and behavioural factors affect perceived news credibility among social media users in Malawi are still not well comprehended.

To fill these gaps, this research creates and validates a comprehensive framework based on Source Credibility Theory, Social Network Theory, Information Quality Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. The research explores how source credibility, online relationships, information quality, media usage frequency, and media interaction affect perceived news reliability among social media users in Malawi. The primary aim of this study is to explore the factors that shape perceived news credibility on social media by analyzing the impact of digital connections, source reliability, information quality, and media engagement among social media users in Malawi.

The research is directed by the following questions:

- **RQ1:** How do digital connections, source trustworthiness, and information quality influence media engagement in social media environments?
- **RQ2:** How do digital connections, source trustworthiness, information quality, and media engagement influence perceived news credibility?
- **RQ3:** Does media engagement mediate the relationships between digital connections, source trustworthiness, information quality, and perceived news credibility?

Literature Review

Media Engagement and Perceived News Credibility

Media engagement denotes the degree to which people actively connect with media content on cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels [22]. Instead of considering audiences as passive receivers of information, modern engagement studies depict users as active contributors who analyse, interpret, and react to media messages [23]. Engagement includes cognitive involvement, shown through attention, interest, and the processing of information; emotional involvement, indicated by feelings and emotional reactions towards content; and behavioural involvement, demonstrated through observable activities like viewing, commenting, liking, sharing, and discussing information [24]. These dimensions together reflect the extent of users' engagement with media content and their overall experience within information contexts. The idea of media engagement is strongly connected to Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which suggests that people actively choose and interact with media to fulfill informational, social, entertainment, and personal requirements [25]. From a UGT viewpoint, users are driven to interact with news material as it satisfies their need for information, social engagement, observation, and involvement in public discussions [26]. As a result, engagement is not just a response to content but an intentional action through which audiences gain value from media consumption [27]. Social media platforms, through their engaging features, allow users to go beyond merely consuming information to actively participating, thus enhancing their involvement with news content [28].

Social Media News Consumption

Social media has changed the way people consume news from mainly a passive activity into an engaging and participatory experience [29]. Users interact with news in numerous ways, such as reading articles, watching videos, leaving comments, liking posts, sharing details, and conversing about news with others [30]. Such engagement behaviours promote enhanced interaction among audiences, content creators, journalists, and news organizations [31]. Consequently, social media users have transitioned from being passive news consumers to becoming active contributors in the production, distribution, and understanding of information [32]. Involvement also indicates more profound levels of information processing. Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, people actively pursue and engage with news content to fulfill their informational and social needs [33]. By engaging in activities like commenting, discussing, and sharing, users pay more attention to news content and become more active in assessing and interpreting the information provided [33]. This engagement encourages thoughtful consideration and aids in developing views on the credibility and significance of news material [34]. Studies indicate that credible sources and high-quality information can enhance engagement by motivating users to invest more time in content interactions and joining online conversations [35].

Theoretical Foundation and Integrated Framework

This research is based on three interconnected theories that together clarify how people assess news trustworthiness in social media settings. Source Credibility Theory [36] suggests that information is more likely to be accepted when it comes from sources regarded as reliable and informed. Social Network Theory highlights how social ties and online connections influence information exposure, endorsement, and credibility assessments, including aspects of completeness, timeliness, and reliability, with superior information boosting credibility perceptions [37-39]. The Uses and Gratifications Theory contends that people actively interact with media to fulfill their informational and

social needs, and that actions like reading, commenting, sharing, and discussing content affect the processing and evaluation of information [40,41]. The combination of these theories offers a comprehensive understanding of how news credibility is perceived in social media contexts. These theories indicate that digital relationships, trust in sources, and information quality influence perceived news credibility both directly and indirectly via media interaction. This acts as a central behavioural process connecting social and informational elements to assessments of credibility in social media contexts.

Hypothesis and Conceptual development

Source Trustworthiness

Source reliability pertains to how much information providers are regarded as trustworthy, truthful, and credible. Source Credibility Theory suggests that people are more inclined to accept and trust information from reliable sources, as these sources diminish uncertainty and boost confidence in the information shared [41]. Trust Transfer Theory indicates that trust established in one entity may be transferred to associated entities [42]. In social media settings, frequent interaction with reputable news outlets, journalists, and social connections can enhance users' readiness to interact with news information [43]. Research indicates that individuals are more inclined to read, comment on, share, and engage with content from reliable sources since trust diminishes perceived risk and increases the perceived worth of information [44]. Additionally, data from credible sources is typically viewed as more trustworthy and dependable, causing users to form more positive assessments of credibility [45]. Consequently, the reliability of the source is anticipated to improve both media interaction and the perception of news credibility.

H1: Source trustworthiness has a significant positive influence on Perceived news credibility.

H2: Source trustworthiness has a significant positive influence on media engagement

Digital Connections

Digital connections denote the social relationships people uphold via social media platforms [46]. Social Network Theory posits that social networks enable the flow of information, provide social support, and offer social validation, shaping users' attitudes and behaviours [47]. In social media settings, engagement with friends, family, and online groups enhances users' visibility to news and promotes involvement in news-related events. Data provided by reliable network members is frequently regarded as more pertinent, enhancing users' chances of engaging with news through reading, commenting, sharing, and discussing it [48]. Motives for social interaction and seeking information have been shown to enhance engagement with online content [48]. Consequently, more robust digital links are anticipated to improve users' interaction with news content on social platforms.

H3: Digital connections have a significant positive influence on media engagement.

Information Quality

Information quality pertains to users' views regarding the precision, significance, comprehensiveness, promptness, and trustworthiness of information [39]. As per Information Quality Theory, quality information diminishes uncertainty and boosts users' trust in the information they engage with [49]. In social media contexts, users tend to interact more with news they consider accurate, valuable, and pertinent to their interests [50]. High-quality information captures user interest and promotes engagement via reading, commenting, sharing, and discussing content [51]. When individuals view information as trustworthy and worthwhile, they are more inclined to dedicate time and energy to interacting with it [52]. Empirical research indicates that the quality of information positively affects online engagement by enhancing the perceived advantages and usefulness of content shared on social media platforms [53]. The study on Source Credibility and Information Quality in Public Engagement on Social Networking Sites during the COVID-19 Crisis revealed that the quality of information greatly improves users' engagement behaviours on social media [53]. Consequently, increased information quality is anticipated to encourage more media interaction among social media users.

H4: Information quality has a significant positive influence on media engagement.

Media Use Frequency

Media usage frequency indicates how often people consistently engage with and absorb news material via various media channels [54]. Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that regular media consumption indicates users' attempts to fulfill their informational, social, and entertainment needs via continuous engagement with media content [55]. Frequent exposure to news boosts familiarity with media platforms and provides more chances for users to read, comment on, share, and discuss news, thus improving media engagement [54]. Regular news consumption can enhance the perception of credibility as it allows users to contrast information from various sources, become acquainted with news organizations, and increase their confidence in assessing information [56]. Earlier research [55] indicates that greater news consumption correlates with enhanced participation and involvement in digital media settings.

H5: Media use frequency has a significant positive influence on media engagement

H6: Media use frequency has a significant positive influence on media engagement

Mediating Role of Media Engagement

Media engagement acts as a behavioural tool that allows users to convert social interactions and assessments of information into judgments of credibility [57]. As per the Uses and Gratifications Theory, users interact with media content by engaging in activities like reading, commenting, sharing, and discussing information, which results in more profound information processing and assessment [56]. Users are more inclined to engage with news on social media platforms when they view news sources as credible, sustain robust digital connections, come across high-quality information, and regularly consume media content [56]. This participation boosts their engagement with the material and improves their capability to evaluate its trustworthiness. Earlier studies indicate that engagement enhances the assessment of information and bolsters perceptions of credibility by motivating users to focus more on the content they encounter. As a result, media involvement is anticipated to mediate the connections among source reliability, digital links, information quality, frequency of media usage, and perceived credibility of news.

H7: Media engagement has a significant positive influence on perceived news credibility.

H8: Media engagement mediates the relationship between source trustworthiness and perceived news credibility.

H9: Media engagement mediates the relationship between digital connections and perceived news credibility.

H10: Media engagement mediates the relationship between information quality and perceived news credibility.

H11: Media engagement mediates the relationship between media use frequency and perceived news credibility.

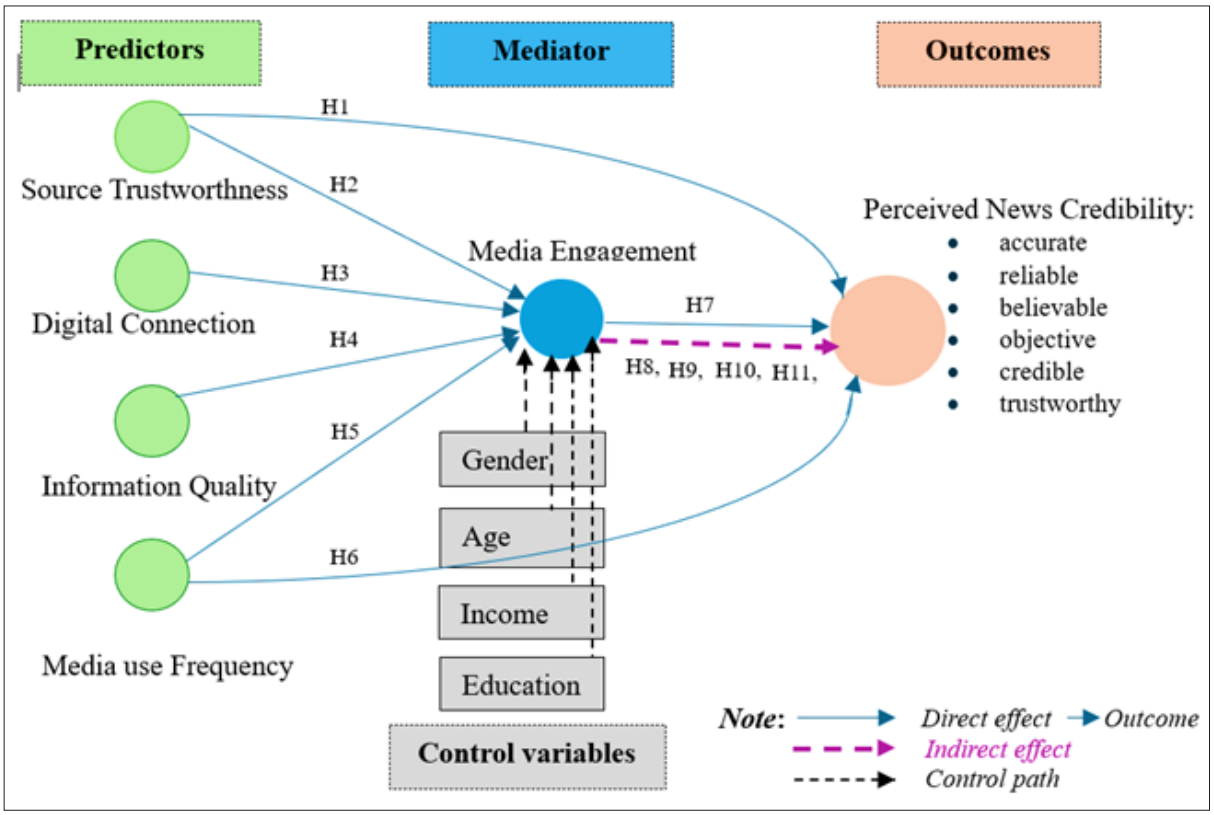

Figure 1: Conceptual; Model

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilized a quantitative explanatory cross-sectional survey method to investigate the connections between digital connectivity, source reliability, information quality, frequency of media use, media participation, and perceived credibility of news in social media contexts. The quantitative method allowed for the gathering of uniform data from a vast number of social media users and supported the statistical evaluation of the suggested connections [58]. Due to the study's emphasis on direct and indirect connections among various latent constructs, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized to evaluate both the measurement and structural models as well as to examine the mediating effect of media engagement [59].

Population and Sample

The research focused on adult social media users (18 years and older) who frequently accessed, shared, and interacted with news content on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Data were gathered from 316 respondents using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The sample size was deemed sufficient for PLS-SEM analysis, offering adequate statistical power and reliable estimation for examining the direct and mediating relationships among digital connection, trustworthiness of the source, quality of information, frequency of media use, media engagement, and perceived credibility of news [60].

Data Collection

Information was gathered through a structured questionnaire given to adult social media users who frequently accessed news via platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The survey was circulated via online platforms and aimed at participants through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Before taking part, respondents received details regarding the study's objectives, the voluntary aspect of their involvement, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent in writing was acquired from all participants prior to the start of data collection. A complete of 316 valid responses were gathered and utilized for further analysis [61].

Data Analysis

Data analysis utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to investigate the connections between digital connectivity, source reliability, information quality, frequency of media use, media engagement, and perceived credibility of news. PLS-SEM was deemed suitable for this research as it allowed for the concurrent evaluation of intricate connections between various latent constructs and facilitated both predictive and explanatory research goals. The examination was conducted in two phases. Initially, the measurement model was analysed to determine the reliability and validity of the constructs by employing indicators like factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity. The structural model was evaluated by analysing path coefficients, the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and hypothesis testing via bootstrapping methods.

Additionally, mediation analysis was performed to assess how much media engagement mediated the relationship among variables. This analytical method offered a strong foundation for assessing the suggested theoretical model and examining the importance of both direct and indirect influences among the study variables [62].

Table 1: Participants and Procedures

Sample characteristics	Name	Frequency	%age
Gender	Male	151	47.8
	Female	165	52.2
Education Level	High school or less	108	34,2
	Diploma	94	29.7
	Bachelor's degree	73	23.1
	Post-graduate	21	6.6
	Master's	18	5.7
Age Group	18yrs-25yrs	77	24.4
	26yrs-35yrs	100	31,6
	36yrs-45yrs	72	22.8
	46yrs-55yrs	48	15.2
	56yrs-65yrs	20	6.3
Income categories	Below 50,000- very low income	219	69.3
	50,001-150,000-Low income	49	15.5
	150,001-300,000-Moderate income	31	9.8
	300,001-600,000-High income	18	5.7

The study involved 316 social media news consumers who were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The sample included 165 women (52.2%) and 151 men (47.8%), showing a fairly equal gender distribution. The majority of participants were aged 26-35 years (31.6%), followed by those aged 18-25 years (24.4%) and 36-45 years (22.8%), indicating that the study primarily included young and middle-aged adults who are generally active on social media. In terms of education, most individuals had a high school education or lower (34.2%) and diploma qualifications (29.7%), with 23.1% holding bachelor's degrees and 12.3% having postgraduate degrees. Regarding income, the majority of participants (69.3%) earned less than MWK 50,000 each month, indicating a largely low-income population. Thus, gender, age, education level, and income were incorporated as control variables in the analysis to consider their possible impact on perceived news credibility and to confirm that the connections among digital connection, source trustworthiness, information quality, media use frequency, media engagement, and perceived news credibility were not obscured by respondents' demographic traits. Gender was represented as a binary variable, age was divided into five ranges (18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, and 56-65 years), education was segmented into five levels (high school or less, diploma, bachelor's degree, postgraduate diploma, and master's degree), and income was sorted into four monthly income brackets from below MWK 50,000 to MWK 300,001-600,000.

Assessment of Measurement Model

The evaluation of the measurement model was performed to assess the reliability and validity of the study constructs prior to examining the hypothesized relationships in the structural model. Using the PLS-SEM methodology, the measurement model was evaluated through indicator loadings, reliability of internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. In particular, factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were analyzed to determine reliability and convergent validity, whereas the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio were employed to evaluate discriminant validity [63]. The findings from these analyses are shown in the subsequent sections.

Table 2: Assessment of Measurement Model

Variable	Item	Outer loadings	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Digital Connection				0.713	0.728	0.824	0.542
	DC1	0.653	1.299				
	DC2	0.839	1.716				
	DC3	0.780	1.596				
	DC4	0.655	1.181				
Information Quality				0.821	0.824	0.882	0.653
	IQ1	0.835	2.061				
	IQ2	0.849	2.227				
	IQ3	0.733	1.429				
	IQ4	0.810	1.684				
Media Engagement				0.764	0.771	0.850	0.588
	ME1	0.672	1.244				
	ME2	0.787	1.538				
	ME3	0.829	1.780				
	ME4	0.771	1.608				
Medium Use Frequency				0.827	0.829	0.878	0.591
	MUF1	0.751	1.742				
	MUF2	0.811	1.954				
	MUF3	0.745	1.609				
	MUF4	0.778	1.685				
	MUF5	0.758	1.592				
Perceived News Credibility				0.860	0.863	0.900	0.643
	PNC1	0.755	1.641				
	PNC2	0.801	1.920				
	PNC3	0.817	2.012				
	PNC4	0.769	1.808				
	PNC5	0.862	2.468				
Source Trustworthiness				0.865	0.866	0.908	0.712
	ST1	0.835	1.982				
	ST2	0.867	2.465				
	ST3	0.839	2.138				
	ST4	0.833	1.872				

Table 2 shows the findings from the evaluation of the measurement model. The results show that every indicator loading surpassed the suggested minimum of 0.60, with values between 0.653 and 0.867, reflecting adequate indicator reliability. Multicollinearity was not an issue since all VIF values remained under the limit of 5.0. The constructs demonstrated sufficient internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values between 0.713 and 0.865, and composite reliability values ranging from 0.824 to 0.908, surpassing the advised minimum of 0.70. Additionally, convergent validity was confirmed since the AVE values varied from 0.542 to 0.712, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.50. In general, the findings validated that the measurement model exhibited adequate reliability and convergent validity, reinforcing the appropriateness of the constructs for future structural model evaluation.

Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity evaluates how separate a construct is from other constructs within the model and identifies phenomena that are not represented by additional variables. This research assessed discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion alongside the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratio. The Fornell-Larcker criterion evaluates if the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs, whereas the HTMT ratio measures the extent of

similarity among constructs and is viewed as a stricter test of discriminant validity [64]. The outcomes from both methods offer proof of the uniqueness of the study constructs and their appropriateness for evaluating the structural model.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Discriminant Validity

	Digital Connection	Information Quality	Media Engagement	Medium Use Frequency	Perceived News Credibility	Source Trustworthiness
Digital Connection						
Information Quality	0.803					
Media Engagement	0.737	0.636				
Medium Use Frequency	0.737	0.722	0.746			
Perceived News Credibility	0.710	0.725	0.802	0.824		
Source Trustworthiness	0.756	0.809	0.646	0.669	0.691	

Table 3 displays the findings of the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio utilized to evaluate discriminant validity among the constructs of the study. The HTMT values varied between 0.636 and 0.824, all under the suggested limit of 0.85, demonstrating sufficient discriminant validity. The maximum HTMT value was noted between Medium Use Frequency and Perceived News Credibility (0.824), whereas the minimum was recorded between Information Quality and Media Engagement (0.636). These findings indicate that every construct was empirically separate from the others and assessed a distinct concept. Consequently, discriminant validity was demonstrated, verifying that the constructs were adequately distinct and appropriate for subsequent structural model analysis.

Furthermore, the Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity assessment was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4. According to this criterion, discriminant validity is established when the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs. The results provide additional evidence regarding the distinctiveness of the study constructs and their suitability for subsequent structural model evaluation.

Table 4: Fornell -Lacker Criterion Discriminant Validity

	Digital Connection	Information Quality	Media Engagement	Medium Use Frequency	Perceived News Credibility	Source Trustworthiness
Digital Connection	0.736					
Information Quality	0.616	0.808				
Media Engagement	0.551	0.510	0.767			
Medium Use Frequency	0.566	0.597	0.596	0.769		
Perceived News Credibility	0.562	0.615	0.654	0.698	0.802	
Source Trustworthiness	0.603	0.684	0.529	0.569	0.598	0.844

Table 4 displays the outcomes of the Fornell-Larcker criterion employed to evaluate discriminant validity. The results suggest that the square root of the AVE for each construct, displayed on the diagonal, surpassed its correlations with all other constructs. In particular, the diagonal values for Digital Connection (0.736), Information Quality (0.808), Media Engagement (0.767), Medium Use Frequency (0.769), Perceived News Credibility (0.802), and Source Trustworthiness (0.844) exceeded their associated inter-construct correlations. These findings verify that every construct had a greater variance with its indicators than with other constructs in the model. Consequently, the Fornell-Larcker criterion confirmed adequate discriminant validity, offering additional proof that the constructs of the study were empirically separate and appropriate for structural model analysis [65].

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) evaluated the predictive accuracy and explanatory capability of the structural model by showing the percentage of variance in the endogenous constructs accounted for by their predictor variables. Higher R^2 values indicate a stronger ability of the model to explain the data. Table 5 displays the outcomes of the R^2 evaluation for Media Engagement and Perceived News Credibility.

Table 5: R^2

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Media Engagement	0.443	0.435
Perceived News Credibility	0.603	0.599

Table 5 displays the R^2 values for the endogenous constructs. The findings indicate that Media Engagement reached an R^2 value of 0.443 (adjusted R^2 = 0.435), signifying that 44.3% of the variance in media engagement was attributed to digital connection, information quality, source credibility, and frequency of media use. Additionally, Perceived News Credibility showed an R^2 value of 0.603 (adjusted R^2 = 0.599), indicating that 60.3% of its variation was accounted for by the predictor variables used in the model. As per widely recognized PLS-SEM standards, the R^2 value for media engagement reflects moderate explanatory strength, whereas the R^2 value for perceived news credibility shows considerable explanatory strength. These results indicate that the suggested model shows an adequate capacity to account for differences in both media involvement and perceived reliability of news.

Effect Size (f^2)

The effect size (f^2) was determined to analyse the relative impact of each predictor variable on the explained variance of the endogenous constructs within the model. In contrast to the coefficient of determination (R^2), which evaluates the model's overall explanatory capability, the f^2 statistic looks at the individual influence of each exogenous variable on an endogenous construct. The findings from the effect size analysis are displayed in Table 6 and offer insights into the strength of the relationships between the study variables.

Table 6: f^2

	f-square
Digital Connection -> Media Engagement	0.048
Information Quality -> Media Engagement	0.003
Media Engagement -> Perceived News Credibility	0.140
Medium Use Frequency -> Media Engagement	0.119
Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	0.217
Source Trustworthiness -> Media Engagement	0.021
Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.070

Table 6 displays the effect sizes (f^2) of the exogenous variables on the endogenous constructs. The findings show that Medium Use Frequency had the most significant impact on Perceived News Credibility (f^2 = 0.217), indicating a medium effect size. Media Engagement similarly had a moderate impact on Perceived News Credibility (f^2 = 0.140), whereas Medium Use Frequency demonstrated a small-to-moderate influence on Media Engagement (f^2 = 0.119). Conversely, Source Trustworthiness had minimal impacts on Perceived News Credibility (f^2 = 0.070) and Media Engagement (f^2 = 0.021), whereas Digital Connection showed a slight effect on Media Engagement (f^2 = 0.048). Information Quality showed a minimal impact on Media Engagement (f^2 = 0.003). Overall, the results indicate that Medium Use Frequency was the strongest predictor in the model, while Information Quality had a negligible impact on explaining Media Engagement.

Post hoc-power analysis

A post hoc power analysis was conducted to evaluate the sufficiency of the sample size and the statistical power of the model in identifying meaningful connections between the study variables. This analysis indicates whether the study possessed adequate power to reduce the chances of Type II errors and reinforces the robustness and reliability of the structural model outcomes. The results of the post hoc power analysis are shown in Table 7

Table 7: Post Hoc-Power Analysis

	Path coefficients	Alpha 1%	Alpha 5%
Digital Connection -> Media Engagement	0.226	0.955	0.991
Information Quality -> Media Engagement	0.057	0.094	0.264
Media Engagement -> Perceived News Credibility	0.307	0.999	1.000
Medium Use Frequency -> Media Engagement	0.344	1.000	1.000
Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	0.394	1.000	1.000
Source Trustworthiness -> Media Engagement	0.159	0.690	0.881
Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.212	0.925	0.983

A post hoc power analysis was performed to determine if the sample size was adequate for identifying the relationships outlined in the structural model and to evaluate the study's statistical power. Post hoc power analysis is frequently used in PLS-SEM to assess the probability that the model accurately detects significant effects and reduces the chances of Type II errors. The analysis offers further proof concerning the sufficiency of the sample size and the reliability of the study results [66].

Assessment of Structural Model

After validating the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to analyse the proposed relationships between the study constructs. The evaluation centered on analyzing the importance and strength of the path coefficients, the model's explanatory power (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and the mediating role of media engagement. The findings from the analysis of the structural model are shown in the subsequent sections.

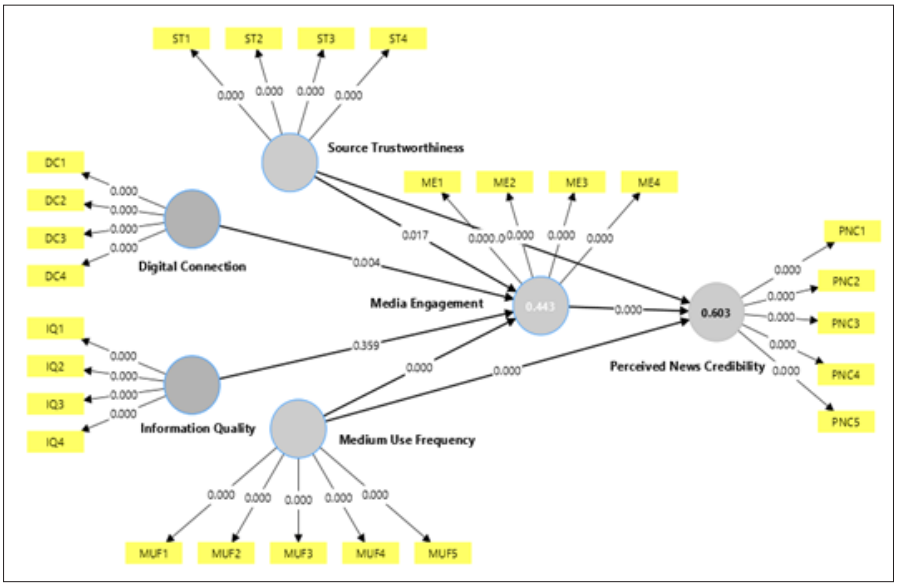

Figure 2: Structural Model

Figure 2 illustrates the outcomes of the structural model, depicting the associations between digital connection, information quality, source trustworthiness, media use frequency, media engagement, and perceived news credibility. The model shows that information quality (β = 0.359) had the most significant positive impact on media engagement, with source trustworthiness (β = 0.017) and digital connection (β = 0.004) following, though the effects of the latter were relatively weak. The model additionally shows that media involvement notably affected perceived news credibility, reinforcing its mediating function in the suggested framework. The endogenous constructs reached R^2 values of 0.443 for media engagement and 0.603 for perceived news credibility, demonstrating that the model accounted for 44.3% of the variance in media engagement and 60.3% of the variance in perceived news credibility. In general, the structural model demonstrates that the suggested predictors help clarify users' engagement with social media news and their views on news credibility.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was performed to investigate if Media Engagement served as an intervening factor by which Digital Connection, Information Quality, Medium Use Frequency, and Source Trustworthiness affected Perceived News Credibility. The importance of the indirect effects was evaluated through the bootstrapping method in PLS-SEM. A notable indirect effect would imply mediation exists, while a non-significant indirect effect would indicate that the link between the predictor and outcome variable is not passed through Media Engagement. The outcomes of the mediation analysis are shown in Figure 3.

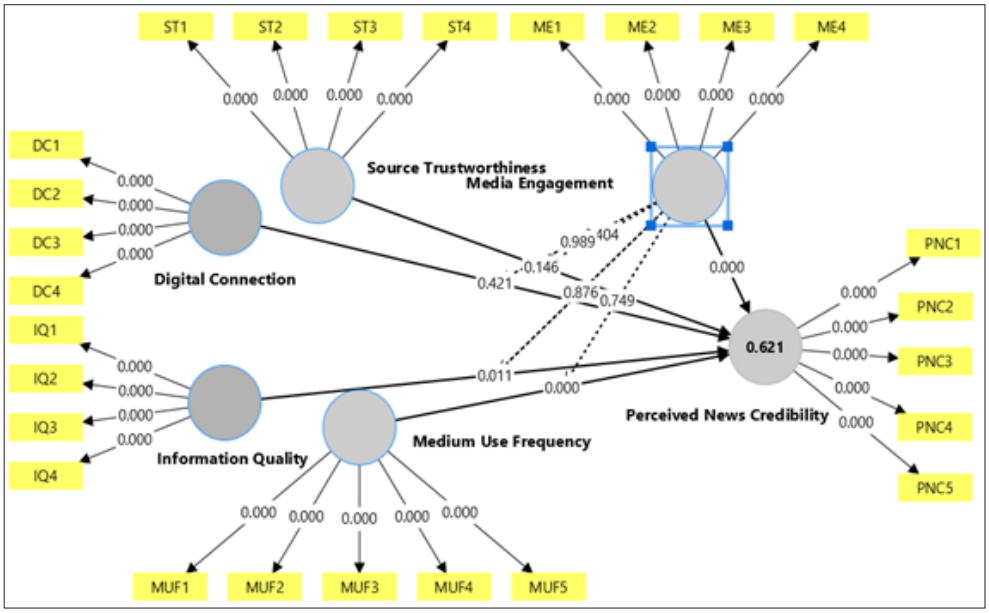

Figure 3: Mediating of Media Engagement

Figure 3 presents the mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of Media Engagement on the relationships between the antecedent variables and Perceived News Credibility. The results indicate that none of the indirect effects were statistically significant. Specifically, the indirect effects of Digital Connection (β = -0.001, t = 0.013, p = 0.989), Information Quality (β = -0.010, t = 0.157, p = 0.876), Medium Use Frequency (β = -0.020, t = 0.320, p = 0.749), and Source Trustworthiness (β = 0.062, t = 0.834, p = 0.404) on Perceived News Credibility through Media Engagement were all insignificant, as their p-values exceeded the 0.05 threshold. Consequently, Media Engagement did not mediate the relationships between these antecedent variables and Perceived News Credibility [67].

Hypothesis Evaluation

An evaluation of the hypothesis was performed to ascertain if the suggested connections between digital connection, information quality, source trustworthiness, media use frequency, media engagement, and perceived news credibility were backed by the empirical evidence. The assessment relied on the importance of the path coefficients derived from the PLS-SEM bootstrapping method, utilizing the relevant β values, t-statistics, and p-values. The outcomes of the hypothesis testing are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Hypothesis Assessment

H	Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Outcome
	Total direct effect						
H1	Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.260	0.260	0.062	4.214	0.000	Significant
H2	Source Trustworthiness -> Media Engagement	0.159	0.159	0.066	2.387	0.017	Significant
H3	Digital Connection -> Media Engagement	0.226	0.230	0.079	2.871	0.004	Significant
H4	Information Quality -> Media Engagement	0.057	0.059	0.062	0.917	0.359	Not Significant
H5	Medium Use Frequency -> Media Engagement	0.344	0.344	0.070	4.949	0.000	Significant
H6	Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	0.500	0.502	0.047	10.704	0.000	Significant
H7	Media Engagement -> Perceived News Credibility	0.307	0.306	0.058	5.322	0.000	Significant
	Mediating effects						
H8	Media Engagement x Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.062	0.061	0.074	0.838	0.402	Not significant
H9	Media Engagement x Digital Connection -> Perceived News Credibility	-0.002	-0.001	0.058	0.031	0.976	Not significant
H10	Media Engagement x Information Quality -> Perceived News Credibility	-0.010	-0.010	0.062	0.154	0.878	Not significant
H11	Media Engagement x Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	-0.019	-0.016	0.061	0.305	0.760	Not significant
	Indirect effect						
	Digital Connection -> Perceived News Credibility	0.069	0.070	0.026	2.617	0.009	Significant
	Information Quality -> Perceived News Credibility	0.017	0.018	0.020	0.884	0.377	Not Significant
	Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	0.106	0.106	0.031	3.442	0.001	Significant
	Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.049	0.048	0.022	2.197	0.028	Significant

Table 8 displays the outcomes of the hypothesis testing concerning the overall direct, mediating, and indirect effects. In total, six out of the eleven hypotheses received support, whereas five hypotheses did not receive support.

Regarding the direct effects, H1 suggested that Source Trustworthiness has a positive impact on Perceived News Credibility, and this was affirmed (β = 0.260, t = 4.214, p < 0.001). Correspondingly, H2 received support, suggesting that Source Trustworthiness has a positive effect on Media Engagement (β = 0.159, t = 2.387, p = 0.017). H3, which suggested a positive correlation between Digital Connection and Media Engagement, was also validated (β = 0.226, t = 2.871, p = 0.004). Nevertheless, H4, which suggested that Information Quality has a positive impact on Media Engagement, was not upheld (β = 0.057, t = 0.917, p = 0.359). Additionally, H5 was confirmed, indicating that Medium Use Frequency has a positive impact on Media Engagement (β = 0.344, t = 4.949, p < 0.001), while H6 was also validated, revealing a substantial positive effect of Medium Use Frequency on Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.500, t = 10.704, p < 0.001). In conclusion, H7 was validated, affirming that Media Engagement has a positive effect on Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.307, t = 5.322, p < 0.001).

Regarding mediation, none of the suggested mediating relationships reached statistical significance. Consequently, H8, which suggested that Media Engagement serves as a mediator between Source Trustworthiness and Perceived News Credibility, was not confirmed (β = 0.062, t = 0.838, p = 0.402). Similarly, H9 (Digital Connection → Media Engagement → Perceived News Credibility), H10 (Information Quality → Media Engagement → Perceived News Credibility), and H11 (Medium Use Frequency → Media Engagement → Perceived News Credibility) lacked support, since all indirect routes were insignificant (p > 0.05).

The analysis of indirect effects additionally indicated that Digital Connection (β = 0.069, p = 0.009), Medium Use Frequency (β = 0.106, p = 0.001), and Source Trustworthiness (β = 0.049, p = 0.028) exhibited significant indirect impacts on Perceived News Credibility, while the indirect effect of Information Quality was not significant (β = 0.017, p = 0.377). The results indicate that Medium Use Frequency was the most significant predictor of Perceived News Credibility, followed closely by Media Engagement and Source Trustworthiness. While Media Engagement directly improved Perceived News Credibility, it did not significantly mediate the connections between the antecedent variables and Perceived News Credibility [63].

Total Direct Confidence

The total direct effects were analysed to evaluate the direct impact of the predictor variables on Perceived News Credibility, considering the relationships outlined in the structural model. This analysis offers understanding of the size and direction of the direct connections between the independent variables and the dependent variable, excluding any mediating influences. Table 9 presents the findings from the analysis of total direct effects.

Table 9: Total Direct Confidence

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	2.5%	97.5%
Digital Connection -> Media Engagement	0.226	0.230	0.076	0.390
Digital Connection -> Perceived News Credibility	0.069	0.070	0.023	0.125
Information Quality -> Media Engagement	0.057	0.059	-0.065	0.179
Information Quality -> Perceived News Credibility	0.017	0.018	-0.019	0.060
Media Engagement -> Perceived News Credibility	0.307	0.306	0.196	0.419
Medium Use Frequency -> Media Engagement	0.344	0.344	0.204	0.474
Medium Use Frequency -> Perceived News Credibility	0.500	0.502	0.410	0.593
Source Trustworthiness -> Media Engagement	0.159	0.159	0.027	0.287
Source Trustworthiness -> Perceived News Credibility	0.260	0.260	0.136	0.379

Table 9 displays the overall direct effects along with their associated 95% confidence intervals. The findings indicate that Medium Use Frequency exerted the most significant positive direct impact on both Media Engagement (β = 0.344; CI [0.204, 0.474]) and Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.500; CI [0.410, 0.593]), suggesting that a higher frequency of media use notably improved users' engagement and perception of credibility. Media Engagement also had a notable positive impact on Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.307; CI [0.196, 0.419]), highlighting its role in influencing credibility assessments. Additionally, Source Trustworthiness had a positive impact on Media Engagement (β = 0.159; CI [0.027, 0.287]) and Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.260; CI [0.136, 0.379]), whereas Digital Connection exhibited positive effects on Media Engagement (β = 0.226; CI [0.076, 0.390]) and Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.069; CI [0.023, 0.125]). In contrast, Information Quality showed relatively weak impacts on Media Engagement (β = 0.057; CI [-0.065, 0.179]) and Perceived News Credibility (β = 0.017; CI [-0.019, 0.060]), with confidence intervals including zero, suggesting that these effects lacked statistical significance. The results indicate that Medium Use Frequency, Media Engagement, and Source Trustworthiness were the primary factors affecting Perceived News Credibility, whereas the role of Information Quality was relatively minor [67,68].

Discussion and Conclusion

The discovery that the trustworthiness of a source positively affected perceived news credibility aligns with recent research showing that source expertise and reliability are significant factors influencing credibility assessments in social media contexts [69]. Likewise, the strong link between the trustworthiness of sources and media engagement reinforces findings that reliable sources promote increased user interaction with online material [70]. The favourable impact of digital connectivity on media involvement corresponds with recent studies on digital news indicating that social media links enhance interaction, participation, and engagement with news content [71]. Nonetheless, in contrast to earlier research indicating a beneficial impact of information quality on online engagement [72]. Information quality did not have a significant effect on media engagement in this study. This implies that users of social media might interact with content driven by social engagement and visibility instead of just on the perceived quality of information.

The notable impact of how often media is used on media engagement and the belief in news credibility aligns with current findings indicating that greater exposure to digital news platforms enhances familiarity and trust in news content [73]. Additionally, the favourable connection between media engagement and perceived

news trustworthiness reinforces evidence that audiences who are cognitively and behaviourally involved often express greater levels of credibility regarding news content [74]. Unexpectedly, media engagement did not notably mediate the associations between source trustworthiness, digital connection, information quality, frequency of media use, and perceived credibility of news. These results indicate that the influence of these preceding variables on perceived news credibility mainly happens via direct pathways instead of through engagement processes. In general, the findings highlight that the frequency of media usage, the trustworthiness of sources, and media engagement are the key factors affecting perceived news credibility in social media contexts.

Theoretical Implication

The results offer multiple theoretical insights to the research on news credibility within social media contexts. Initially, the beneficial impacts of digital connectivity and source reliability on media involvement indicate that users tend to engage with news material more when they have strong ties to their online communities and regard sources as trustworthy. This reinforces the idea that credibility assessments on social media are affected by both message features and social as well as relational elements. Secondly, the notable influence of source trustworthiness on perceived news credibility strengthens credibility theory by showing that trust in news outlets continues to be an essential factor in credibility perceptions, even within highly interactive digital settings. Third, the significant impact of media usage frequency on media engagement and perceived news reliability enhances media dependency theories by suggesting that regular exposure to news via social media promotes familiarity and bolsters credibility evaluations. Additionally, the strong connection between media engagement and perceived news credibility indicates that users who are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally involved with news content are more likely to consider it credible. Nonetheless, the lack of a significant effect of information quality on media engagement and the absence of notable mediating effects suggest that engagement may not serve as the mechanism by which prior factors impact perceived news credibility. This discovery questions beliefs in earlier engagement studies and indicates that perceptions of credibility on social media might be influenced more directly by source reliability, online relationships, and usage habits rather than solely by engagement mechanisms. In summary, the research enhances comprehension of how social, source-related, and behavioural elements work together to influence perceived news credibility in modern social media contexts.

Practical Contributions

The results provide significant practical consequences for social media networks, news agencies, and lawmakers. The beneficial effect of digital connectivity indicates that users tend to view news as trustworthy when they engage with similar networks, although this could strengthen echo chambers and restrict access to varied perspectives. Social media platforms ought to encourage both significant relationships and diverse content to balance user engagement with informed news intake. The crucial importance of source reliability suggests that platforms can boost perceived news trustworthiness by enhancing source validation processes, increasing transparency, and favouring content from reputable news sources. The discovery that the frequency of media usage was the most significant predictor of perceived news credibility implies that ongoing exposure to news influences credibility views; thus, news organizations and social media platforms ought to prioritize providing reliable, accurate, and consistent information. Additionally, the beneficial impact of media involvement on perceived news credibility underscores the significance of fostering interactive and substantial user engagement via comments, discussions, and news-sharing initiatives. Nevertheless, as media engagement did not serve as a mediator in the links between the precursor variables and perceived news credibility, initiatives aimed at enhancing credibility should concentrate mainly on bolstering source trustworthiness, encouraging responsible digital interactions, and advocating for quality news consumption instead of depending exclusively on strategies that enhance engagement. In general, cooperation between news organizations and social media platforms is crucial for addressing misinformation and enhancing public confidence in news shared via social media networks.

Limitation and Direction for Future Studies

This research adds to the scarce studies on perceived news credibility in social media settings in the context of Malawi. Nonetheless, various constraints must be recognized. Initially, employing purposive and snowball sampling could restrict the applicability of the results to all social media users in Malawi. Secondly, the cross-sectional design collected respondents' views at one specific moment and thus could not demonstrate shifts in credibility perceptions over time. Third, the research concentrated mainly on social media users and did not evaluate credibility perceptions among traditional media outlets like radio, television, and newspapers, which are still significant news sources in Malawi. Future research should utilize longitudinal approaches to investigate how perceptions of news credibility develop in reaction to shifting digital media landscapes and the rise of misinformation issues. Comparative analyses of social media platforms and conventional media sources like MBC, Zodiak Broadcasting Station, Times Group, and MIJ FM may offer richer understanding of credibility variations among news outlets. Moreover, upcoming studies ought to explore platform-specific impacts by contrasting Facebook, WhatsApp, X, YouTube, and TikTok, considering their increasing significance in news distribution in Malawi. Additional research could examine other factors influencing perceived news credibility, including media literacy, fact-checking habits, political beliefs, and institutional trust. Ultimately, upcoming studies should explore the reciprocal connection between the credibility of social media and that of news organizations, especially as Malawian media outlets increasingly depend on social platforms for news distribution and audience interaction.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest

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Ethical Compliance Statement

The research obtained ethical approval from Exploits University Research Ethics Committee (Reference No. 2026/006/057). Informed consent in writing was secured from all participants prior to their participation in the study. To safeguard the rights and privacy of participants, stringent protocols were established to guarantee anonymity, confidentiality, and the secure management of all research data.

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