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Research Article

Unpacking credibility evaluation on digital media: a case for interpretive qualitative approaches

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Abstract

We argue for more serious consideration of interpretive qualitative approaches in research on information credibility evaluation in digitally mediated contexts. Through reviewing existing literature on credibility and drawing on our own experiences of conducting research projects on credibility evaluation in diverse cultural contexts, we contend that interpretive qualitative approaches help researchers develop a much-needed communicative and relationally and culturally situated understanding of credibility, complicating dominant quantitative and psychologically-oriented accounts. We detail how these approaches add important nuance to how credibility is conceptualized and operationalized and reveal the complexity of credibility evaluation as a social process. We also outline how they aid researchers studying misinformation engagement, especially in popular bounded social media places like private groups and chats. The approach we develop here provides new insights that can inform ongoing global efforts by researchers, policy makers, and citizens to more fully understand the complexity of information verification online.

Keywords: credibility, interpretive qualitative methods, digital media, misinformation, messaging platforms

Research shows that people worldwide are concerned about being exposed to misinformation online, regardless of its actual prevalence (Knuutila et al., 2022). In response to these concerns, scholars have examined how people engage with information in digitally mediated spaces, particularly focusing on how people evaluate the *credibility* of information (Metzger et al., 2015). While conceptualizations of credibility vary across disciplines (Rieh & Danielson, 2007), there is a rich history of credibility research within communication studies, wherein credibility is understood as an individual's perception of the source, medium or information's believability (Metzger, 2007; Metzger et al., 2015; Newhagen & Nass, 1989; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Most of this research, however, is situated within the positivist-behavioral paradigm and relies on quantitative surveys and experiments (Keshavarz, 2021; Metzger et al., 2010; Yu & Shen, 2024). Communication researchers, therefore, risk predominantly relying on a partial, quantitatively measurable, understanding of credibility.

We argue that in digitally mediated spaces, where people are inundated with information from various sources, what is viewed as credible is communicatively constructed through the interaction of multiple relational, situational, and cultural factors. There is, therefore, a need for research that asks how this array of complex factors interacts to produce contextually contingent and constantly fluid evaluations by social actors. Interpretive qualitative methods are well-equipped to unearth and interrogate these complexities, which are difficult to reduce to predefined quantifiable categories. In this article, we argue for the use of interpretive qualitative approaches to studying credibility. We draw inspiration from media reception studies, where methods such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation have long been used to highlight the active role of audiences in interpreting polysemic media texts in multiple ways (Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 2010, 2015). This is because such methods allow space for participants to explain the motivations behind their agentic choices. To date, this active audience approach has largely been overlooked in credibility research. As Marwick (2018) argues, adopting such an approach can help researchers develop a fully sociotechnical understanding of people's engagement with (mis)information in online environments.

To support this argument for using interpretive qualitative methods, we draw on our own experiences of conducting innovative qualitative research to examine information credibility evaluation, particularly in highly popular bounded social media places (BSMPs) such as private groups and chats within messaging platforms (Malhotra, 2023, 2025). These research projects span Europe, Latin America, and North America, and include samples focusing on diaspora communities from East and South Asia. Project 1 (Malhotra) was a mixed-methods project, including interviews with 35 U.S.-based users of BSMPs, including private chats and groups on platforms such as WhatsApp, Discord, and Facebook, with the project examining how people evaluate the credibility of

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information within these places. Project 2 (Chadwick, Vaccari, Hall, & Lawson) was a large-scale, longitudinal mixed-methods project in the UK that investigated everyday encounters with (mis)information on messaging, including two waves of interviews, media diary contributions, and national surveys (the Everyday Misinformation Project). Also using diary techniques and in-depth interviews, Project 3 (Xia) focused on how Chinese immigrants in Toronto engage with the news. Finally, Project 4 (Stahl) explored how WhatsApp users in São Paulo, Brazil, assess the credibility of political information through a mixed-methods study involving diaries and in-depth interviews. In the main body of this article, we reflect on select empirical insights and methodological choices from each of these projects. Taken together, these systematic new additions to the sparse qualitative work previously available on this topic present an opportunity for reflection. Our aim is to highlight the utility of interpretive qualitative research in studying credibility evaluation on digital media and some of the caveats associated with quantitative approaches to this topic, with insights from our projects serving as exemplars to support our argument. Readers interested in a more extensive account of our projects can refer to Table 1, which includes details on each project's samples, methods, key research questions and findings, and to the empirical publications we reference throughout. Where useful, we augment our methodological insights with evidence from some of the few other studies that have used interpretive qualitative methods to investigate credibility.

Through drawing on insights from these projects, in what follows, we focus on how interpretive qualitative research can help scholars conceptualize and operationalize credibility in more nuanced and context-rich ways and better understand the credibility evaluation process. Furthermore, we highlight the utility of this approach in two areas of digitally mediated credibility evaluation research that have particular contemporary significance—misinformation evaluation and the specific context of BSMPs. Finally, we also reflect on some of the limitations associated with interpretive qualitative approaches and present some concrete strategies for employing these approaches to more effectively research credibility.

Understanding credibility as a concept and process

Conceptualization and operationalization of credibility

Communication scholarship on credibility can be traced back to Hovland et al.'s (1953) research, with credibility treated as a receiver-oriented construct (Metzger, 2007), and generally as a broader construct than trustworthiness (Metzger et al., 2015; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Quantitative measures of credibility in communication research typically distinguish between three objects of credibility assessment—source, message, and media (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). Source credibility is often measured by asking survey or experiment participants to assess a source's trustworthiness and expertise (Choi & Stvilia, 2015; Flanagin & Metzger, 2008, 2020); measuring message credibility involves participants assessing a message's accuracy, authenticity, and believability (Appelman & Sundar, 2016); and media credibility is operationalized through measuring the extent to which a medium (e.g., radio, TV, newspapers) is viewed as fair, unbiased, complete, accurate, and trustworthy (Metzger et al., 2003; Meyer, 1988). While these operationalizations continue to dominate quantitative credibility research, they come with limitations that interpretive qualitative work can help to address.

First, the distinction between source, message, and medium as objects of assessment has increasingly eroded as people engage with information on digital media (Metzger et al., 2003; Sundar, 2008). What an individual considers a source, medium, or message is context-dependent and shaped by the mediated space in which one encounters information. These aspects are difficult to neatly categorize under traditional quantitative measures. This was the case in Project 1, which focused on how people evaluate information credibility within BSMPs (Malhotra, 2023; Malhotra & Shin, 2025). Interview participants mentioned considering the reputation of the information sharer; the reputation of the institutional source of the information; how interpersonally close and familiar they are with the information sharer; the size, history, and visibility of the private social media group within which the information is shared; and the public perception of the social media platform on which the information is shared. This resulted in some people viewing information shared on small and/or long-standing private messaging groups as particularly credible. These findings reveal that individuals assess credibility at multiple levels, may consider an individual, group, or institution as an information source, and may believe that a group or a social media platform is the medium in which they are encountering information. Utilizing interpretive qualitative interviews helps highlight how these different objects of assessment intersect and are more or less salient for different social actors, depending on contextual and situational factors. This is because interviews focus on subjective meaning-making and are able to capture people's variegated perceptions of what a source or medium means to them. Conversely, quantitative measures of source, medium, or message credibility impose researcher definitions onto participants.

Second, it is important to note that the conceptualization and quantitative operationalization of credibility is primarily based on research conducted in the Global North in English-speaking contexts, an issue that is endemic to the broader field of communication studies (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2019). This creates barriers to conducting equivalent research across linguistic and cultural contexts. This was an issue in Project 4, which set out to use Appelman and Sundar's (2016) quantitative measure for message credibility (which includes accuracy, authenticity, and believability as dimensions) to complement qualitative open-ended questions on the evaluation of political information. The researcher encountered difficulties with this operationalization due to credibility and believability both being translated to Portuguese as "credibilidade." However, the use of interviews to explore these topics allowed the researcher to ask the participants to define credibility in their own words. This revealed which credibility constructs were more salient in the context of political information on WhatsApp and how this affected the subsequent assessment process in complex and interconnected ways.

Similarly, during interviews with Chinese immigrants in Canada for Project 3, Xia (2022) found that, when it came to the information source, participants preferred phrases such as "on our side" or "represent our voice" rather than the

Table 1. Project details.

Project	Location and time	Methods	Sample details	Key research questions	Key findings
1	United States (2023)	• In-depth interviews. • 2 × 2 online experiment informed by interview findings. Participants assessed the credibility of the same message in private or public social media groups.	• Interviews with U.S.-based social media users, oversampling for people from diasporic communities ($N = 35$). • Experiment with U.S.-based social media users ($N = 200$).	**RQ1:** What heuristics do people use while evaluating information credibility in bounded online spaces? **RQ2:** How do the affordances and perceived intimacy associated with bounded online spaces impact credibility evaluation?	• BSMPs' intimacy and low visibility impacts interviewees' credibility evaluation heuristics. Consequently, these places are perceived as credible compared to public spaces. • Heuristics include associating BSMPs with reputable and familiar information sharers, misinformation correction, and the ability to curate a credible information environment. • Experiment shows that perceived intimacy of BSMPs mediates relationship between visibility and credibility. Lower visibility > higher intimacy > higher credibility.
2	United Kingdom (2021–2024)	• Two waves of in-depth interviews. • Interview participants uploaded examples of (mis)information via smartphone app before Wave 2. • Survey with experiment. • Two-wave panel survey.	• Interviews and media diaries: 102 members of the U.K. public who use messaging platforms (Wave 2 interview $N = 80$). • Survey with experiment: Nationally representative sample ($N = 2{,}580$). • Two-wave panel survey: Nationally representative sample ($N = 2{,}000$).	**RQ:** How do people in the UK decide what to trust on personal messaging platforms?	• Conflict avoidance can make people reluctant to challenge misinformation on messaging apps. • Group "rules" can foster norms of collective reflection and epistemic vigilance, but their usefulness for combating misinformation differs between large and small messaging groups. • Some people engage in everyday ontological narratives of social distinction regarding online misinformation, which may impact vigilance and receptiveness to interventions. • Norms of verification of numerical (mis)information on personal messaging involve complex processes of integrating information from interpersonal ties and public discourse. • The public has variable perceptions of WhatsApp's "forwarded" and "forwarded many times" tags, undermining their efficiency as misinformation warnings.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Project	Location and time	Methods	Sample details	Key research questions	Key findings
3	Canada (Chinese immigrant population; 2020–2021)	• Three-day news diaries. • In-depth interviews before and after diaries, with the second interview guided by diary responses.	42 Chinese immigrants in the Toronto area, including first- and second-generation immigrants. Age and gender distributions are representative of the Chinese-Canadian population.	**RQ1:** How do Chinese immigrants reflexively engage with news in everyday life, and how is this impacted by their social and cultural contexts? **RQ2:** How do Chinese immigrants evaluate information credibility using resources from everyday life?	• Personal experience rooted in cultural background shapes decisions regarding which information is worth engaging with. Some information is disregarded or treated superficially resulting in no conclusion regarding credibility. However, this can influence future credibility evaluations. • People often rely on the idea of "plausibility" to decide whether to trust information, matching new information with prior culturally acquired knowledge to check whether claims are plausible.
4	Brazil (2022)	• Solicited diaries in which participants were asked questions about the last piece of political information received on WhatsApp. • In-depth interviews guided by diary responses.	• Diaries conducted in the Metropolitan Area of São Paulo, Brazil, using quota sampling and controlling for age, gender, and political opinion ($N = 30$). • Interviews with 14 of the diary participants.	**RQ1:** How does the process of credibility assessment of political information occur on WhatsApp? **RQ2:** How do sources, social interactions among users, and app affordances impact the practices and criteria used to assess the credibility of political information received on the app?	• Credibility assessment process guided by heuristics related to the message, the sharer and source of the information. When users choose to evaluate information further, they often rely on external research or consult trusted others. • WhatsApp's low visibility limits users' ability to trace information's path and source, resulting in many users relying on the perceived credibility of familiar information sharers. • Norms in WhatsApp groups affect credibility assessment. Norms of conflict avoidance discourage misinformation correction, but some groups establish in-depth verification expectations.

direct Chinese translation of the word credibility. This demonstrates that what credibility means is culturally and contextually informed, not reducible to a universal set of measures. The uncritical use of quantitative measures of credibility in non-English speaking contexts exemplifies the tropicalization of concepts, wherein a concept or framework developed in the Global North is unquestioningly applied to understand phenomena in the Global South (Gómez-Cruz et al., 2023). Interpretive qualitative approaches can help researchers address this issue by inductively unearthing linguistically and culturally specific understandings of credibility and its associated dimensions. Qualitatively generated insights like this can also inform the development of quantitative measures better suited to linguistic and cultural contexts outside of the Global North. This is important because there is a need for more research on information evaluation within these contexts (Altay et al., 2023).

Credibility evaluation as a communicative, relational, and cultural process

Interpretive qualitative approaches can also help researchers better understand the *process* of credibility evaluation, including the factors that impact it. Quantitative research has primarily underscored how the credibility evaluation process is impacted by quantitatively measurable factors like cognitive biases, individual skills and knowledge, personality traits, demographic background, levels of internet use and access, and message characteristics (Amazeen, 2024; Flanagin et al., 2020; Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Yu & Shen, 2024). This is reflected in the theoretical frameworks of cognitive psychology that typically undergird this research. For example, Fogg's (2003) Prominence-Interpretation Theory focuses on how individual factors influence the cues people pay attention to while evaluating credibility. Meanwhile, dual processing models, like the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (Chaiken, 1987), posit that the extent to which people critically evaluate information depends on their individual ability and motivation (Metzger, 2007). Certainly, this important area of research contributes insights about how individual differences influence the credibility evaluation process. Yet, this approach has often led researchers to frame credibility evaluation as an individual and psychologically-oriented process rather than a communicatively-, relationally-, and culturally-oriented process. This understanding is restrictive as it underplays how people draw on culturally-specific narratives, prior life experiences, broader public discourse, and interpersonal networks while assessing information credibility. These complex factors are difficult to reduce to quantitative measures.

Existing qualitative research on credibility underscores the importance of such factors. For instance, research on QAnon conspiracy theories highlights how people end up believing in these theories as a result of interpreting information through the lens of culturally- and ideologically-rooted narratives associated with evangelical Christianity rather than simply because of limited access to factual information (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Tripodi, 2018). Meanwhile, the literature on online rumors demonstrates how engagement with rumors is a form of *collective* sense-making through the presentation of and contestation over evidence (Bordia & DiFonzo, 2004; Dailey & Starbird, 2015). This insight is also reflected in qualitative studies on news engagement that highlight how people rely on prior life experiences and trusted social contacts to assess news credibility (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Similarly, through focus groups conducted in Russia, Alyukov (2023) outlines how citizens assess propaganda by drawing on prior knowledge gained from personal experience with their environment or derived from culturally-inflected popular wisdom. These studies demonstrate how the open-endedness of interpretive qualitative methods enables researchers to capture the role of collective sense-making and culturally-specific knowledge in assessing credibility.

Some interpretive qualitative studies also focus on the role of interpersonal relationships, highlighting how interpersonal networks are viewed as credible sources while verifying the accuracy of online information (Edgerly, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). This phenomenon is especially salient in contexts where media are distrusted, as interpersonal sources are often viewed as more credible than institutional sources (Szostek, 2018), and people turn to interpersonal networks to confirm the accuracy of information and negotiate which verification strategies are deemed appropriate (Pasitselska, 2022). These studies primarily rely on interviews and focus groups, which are suitable for understanding interpersonal relationships and interactions because they involve researchers and participants communicatively constructing knowledge (Tracy, 2013). Thus, overall, research on credibility that employs interpretive qualitative approaches highlights how audiences exercise agency and draw on personal knowledge, cultural narratives, and interpersonal resources while interpreting information.

These strengths are also reflected in our own projects. Project 3 examined the role of culturally-situated prior life experiences in how people evaluate information credibility. Xia's (2022) analysis explicitly embedded each study participant within the broader social and cultural context of multigenerational Chinese immigration. In-depth interviews revolving around a three-day news diary revealed two key dynamics. First, personal experience shaped decisions regarding which information was worth engaging with. When it was perceived to have low relevance to one's personal life, some information was treated with *inattention* (minimal attention or total disregard) or *indeterminacy* (superficial engagement that comes to no conclusion regarding credibility). While insignificant on their own, such fleeting encounters did sometimes become part of participants' mental pool of resources and influenced future credibility evaluations. Second, when individuals paid substantial attention to a piece of information, they often relied on the idea of "plausibility" (Fine & DiFonzo, 2011) to decide whether to trust it. They matched new information with knowledge they had previously obtained and checked whether the claims were plausible. This process intermingled with identity, as those who had a strong emotional attachment to China tended to deem positive stories about their homeland more plausible and worthy of their attention. In practice, plausibility was often coupled with perceived source trustworthiness. Some participants expressed confusion or took the message "with a grain of salt" when the source seemed credible, but the information was implausible (or vice versa). This intricate process is difficult to pin down without an inductive approach to studying credibility evaluation, and even if researchers attempt to measure key aspects of this process, quantitative methods generally lack the ability to capture the aforementioned modes of subjective sense-making in people's credibility evaluations.

Meanwhile, Project 1 focused on the role of interpersonal networks in shaping credibility evaluation in BSMPs (Malhotra, 2023; Malhotra & Shin, 2025). Through in-depth interviews where participants were asked to articulate their credibility evaluation process, the research found that one of the key heuristics or mental shortcuts they relied on was the *reputation heuristic*. This refers to the idea that information is credible when shared by a recognized and familiar source (Metzger et al., 2010). Much of existing research on this heuristic focuses on how people view information shared by reputable institutions as credible (Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018). However, qualitative interviews revealed that in private interpersonal groups and chats, people primarily considered the reputation of the *individual* or the *group* sharing the information (also a key finding of Project 2). Participants emphasized that they view interpersonally familiar individuals—close friends and family—as reputable information sharers, though an exception was older family members, who were associated with sharing misinformation due to a perceived lack of digital literacy. Meanwhile, in private groups centered around shared interests and hobbies, long-standing groups were viewed as more credible because members had built a sense of familiarity, shared history, and trust. The fact that familiarity impacted perceptions of credibility in the pre-digital era is well known (Chaiken, 1987). While quantitative research can confirm this relationship between interpersonal familiarity and credibility, Project 1's findings demonstrate how interpretive qualitative research explains in detail the factors underlying this relationship, which include intergenerational perceptions, shared history, and interpersonal trust. This is because interpretive qualitative methods typically involve encouraging participants to reflect on these relational aspects and broader social processes. Moreover, quantitative measures impose a predefined and static idea of reputation to measure the extent to which a person, group, or institution is viewed as reputable. Conversely, interpretive qualitative approaches allow researchers to examine how reputation is communicatively and contextually established, maintained, and potentially, challenged. This is because of the open-ended and interactional nature of such approaches.

One strand of findings from Project 2 also focused on interpersonal communication, highlighting how people alternately cross-check interpersonal conversations and public discourse while deciding whether numerical information shared by peers on personal messaging apps is credible. Utilizing in-depth, semistructured interviews and media diaries, and taking a relational approach to understanding credibility evaluation on these apps, the study identified three verification practices: contextualizing the sender's motivations with reference to public discourse; selectively trusting the sender's competence in light of public signals of salient expertise; and using public sources to assess the information. These practices point to the complex integration of interpersonal relationships and public discourse while evaluating credibility (Lawson et al., 2024). The situated approach of the study enabled the researchers to position the credibility of numerical information not as individualized or fixed, but as practiced, context-driven, and relational. Such integrative processes, and the nuanced histories of interpersonal experiences that inform them, are difficult to capture through standardized measurement employing limited types and directions of relationships between predefined variables. Furthermore, like many of the findings in Project 2, these verification processes emerged inductively from the fieldwork in a way that would not have been possible through quantitative surveys or experiments. The longitudinal approach of Project 2, involving two waves of interviews with a smartphone diary exercise in between, also revealed that these verification strategies endured over time, despite major external changes such as the UK's emergence from COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Indeed, even where a longitudinal component is not included, interpretive qualitative approaches lend themselves well to exploring temporal context as participants can be asked to reflect on particular past experiences in detail.

This link between interpretive qualitative approaches and temporality is also reflected in Project 4, where semistructured interviews helped the researcher avoid the partial snapshots provided by survey experiments and enabled participants to reflect on how the credibility assessment process can shift over time. For instance, participants identified how the 2022 Brazilian Presidential elections affected relationships and social norms differently in different group chats, influencing credibility evaluation. Politically congruent groups facilitated discussions, often becoming the reference for credible information. Conversely, politically diverse family groups became sites of conflict during the elections, frequently leading to the establishment of rules to avoid confrontation but also disengagement by many group members. By allowing the participants to describe their experiences across different moments and within different groups, the interviews captured the evolving ways people engage with political information and assess its credibility. While longitudinal surveys can often capture changes around specific events, in-depth interviews are better equipped to reflect the nuanced interplay between relational and temporal dynamics.

Together, our projects demonstrate that interpretive qualitative approaches generate rich insights into how people assess digital content *at* and *across* individual, interpersonal, and public levels. Thinking across these levels is key to understanding credibility evaluation as a communicative, relational, and cultural process, a complex and dynamic progression of thoughts that can evolve over time and cannot be separated from social contexts. This approach enables researchers to move away from viewing credibility evaluation as an exclusively individualized and psychological process. Instead, it recognizes how people actively draw on personal, interpersonal, and cultural resources to assess information in multiple ways, with broader social structures and inequalities shaping the extent to which different social actors have access to these resources. Knowledge produced through this approach can also inform the variables quantitative research employs while studying different aspects of the credibility evaluation process.

Having discussed how this interpretive orientation adds nuance to how credibility is conceptualized and operationalized, and how credibility evaluation is understood as a process, we now hone in on how interpretive qualitative methods can be applied to two prominent research areas associated with credibility—misinformation and BSMPs.

Credibility and misinformation research

Perhaps the most high-profile area of research that concerns digitally mediated credibility evaluation today is scholarship on misinformation (which we use here broadly,

encompassing deliberately misleading "disinformation" as well as what has sometimes been called "fake news"). However, this research area is dominated by quantitative studies. These have much to offer the study of misinformation, including highlighting the scale of its spread (e.g., Allen et al., 2020) and its influence at a population level (Moore et al., 2023). At the same time, as we outline below, interpretive qualitative approaches have unique strengths that can enhance our understanding of people's experiences with and interpretations of misinformation.

Defining misinformation

What misinformation means to people is socially contested and constituted by competing discourses framing it as harmful or innocuous (Malhotra et al., 2022). Indeed, even researchers have struggled to agree on a concrete definition of misinformation, not least because of the fraught process of establishing consensus on what is accurate objective truth (Vraga & Bode, 2020). Across and within disciplines, conceptualizations and operationalizations of misinformation differ in their focus on facticity versus deception, and whether things like propaganda, clickbait headlines, and hyperpartisan news should be included (Altay et al., 2023). There is also evidence that people deem content they simply find "incredible" or which they disagree with as "fake news" (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

This contestation over definitions presents serious challenges for researchers who rely on the dominant method of survey experiments to study misinformation evaluation. In experiments, researchers typically use images or other recreations of social media environments in which (mis)information is encountered, seeking to measure people's responses to what the researchers define as true and false information or corrections to false information (e.g., Bhattacherjee, 2022; Bode & Vraga, 2018; Dias et al., 2020). In reality, as noted above, everyday definitions of misinformation are often slippery, and how the public understands misinformation may not align with how researchers define it.

Under these conditions, interpretive qualitative approaches are advantageous because they allow participants to explore and draw on their own definitions and understandings of misinformation. All four of our projects invited participants to consider "misinformation" in whichever way they might personally define it, and to talk about "news" or "information" in its broadest sense. When asked to give examples of what they considered misinformation, participants across these projects predictably mentioned false information regarding COVID-19 vaccines and flat earth conspiracy theories. However, their examples also included politically contentious viewpoints such as whether or not the UK should have left the EU, deception tactics like phishing and other scams, and sensationalized media coverage of topics like celebrities and crime.

In this way, interpretive qualitative research can reveal how lay audiences ascribe more expansive definitions to misinformation that extend beyond straightforward factual inaccuracies. Methods such as semistructured interviews and smartphone diary studies especially help to capture the coconstruction of such definitions. These and other qualitative approaches can help expand our knowledge about how people evaluate misinformation beyond the narrow definition of misinformation captured by survey experiments. The results of such qualitative studies can also inform how misinformation is defined and operationalized in quantitative studies going forward.

Engaging with misinformation in context

Interpretive qualitative approaches also help researchers better understand how people engage with and evaluate misinformation within specific contexts. These approaches help to eschew the problematic but all too common framing of digital media audiences as cultural dupes who passively believe any information (Marwick, 2018). This is because interpretive qualitative approaches help researchers understand how specific groups engage with misinformation "*in situ*—as part of daily life" (Marwick, 2018, p. 489). Moreover, as noted above, methods such as interviews and focus groups allow space for participants to explain the motivations behind their agentic choices.

For example, through in-depth interviews with young people in the Netherlands, Swart and Broersma (2022) find that because some young people cynically believe that all news sources are biased and untrustworthy, they regard trust and reliability as irrelevant when choosing news sources. This explains why they may frequently turn to certain sources despite not trusting them to provide factual information. While a quantitative approach could also feasibly uncover this phenomenon, it would struggle to explain the affective reasons behind it. In contrast, Swart and Broersma's qualitative approach enables them to unearth these reasons by giving participants space to explain the complex, and at times seemingly contradictory, motivations behind engaging with misinformation. This helps present a more nuanced view of why people engage with misinformation, rather than perpetuating a hypodermic needle model whereby media simply inject misinformation into passive audiences (Marwick, 2018).

A similar seemingly paradoxical relationship between trust and credibility is especially salient in contexts associated with state- or elite-led propaganda. In such contexts, interpretive qualitative approaches allow researchers to explain this relationship through considering the historical complexities and unique circumstances that shape the reception of misinformation (Nguyễn et al., 2022). For example, within the Chinese context, audiences assign credibility to state media even though the latter's biases are an open secret (Xu, 2012). Project 3 explored this phenomenon and highlighted audiences' agentic engagement with regime media. When the researcher talked with Chinese immigrants in Canada about their consumption of Chinese state media ("guanfang," or official sources), he found that some viewed consuming state media channels as a "filtering" process that helped reduce cognitive overload by providing a definitive account of events, while others considered official news sources as good indicators of upcoming political and economic changes in China. Regardless, most were fully aware that state media channels propagate the government's agenda, and "whole truths" might not be gathered reliably from these sources. Therefore, these participants' reliance on state media indicates a need for certainty and guidance while navigating the information landscape, rather than a blind faith in the veracity of its reporting. This nuanced understanding is unlikely to emerge from quantitative survey questions about the credibility of certain official sources, which are ill-equipped to tease out subjective perceptions of what credibility means in a propaganda-laden context. Interpretive qualitative methods, in contrast, excel at unearthing polysemy and non-obvious

uses of information sources, allowing participants to articulate the complex motivations behind their choice of media and information sources. These insights can be further complemented with randomized experiments to guard against self-report bias. Furthermore, the examples discussed here illustrate the importance of investigating how people experience and evaluate (mis)information across a range of national, cultural, and political contexts.

Recognizing audiences' agency in interpreting misinformation in context does not mean assuming that everyone is capable of accurately gauging the veracity of information. Rather, as some of Project 2's findings demonstrate, people's narratives about their ability to make credibility judgments are relationally constructed and complicated by social status. The research revealed how people engage in "everyday ontological narratives of social distinction" in relation to misinformation. That is, they constructed themselves as more savvy or objective and therefore more resilient to misinformation than a naïve, generalized other (Hall et al., 2023a). This act of differentiating oneself from "other people," particularly when understood in the context of the interaction between participant and researcher, is a signal of social status that indicates the existence of underlying normative ideals. Quantitative survey-based studies have pointed to a tendency for people to perceive that media messages have a greater influence on others than on themselves (third-person perception, TPP), including in the context of misinformation (e.g., Jang & Kim, 2018). TPP represents a descriptive measure of psychological perceptions, but interpretive qualitative approaches can reveal how these self-evaluations are discursively constructed and maintained within social interactions. This is because the in-depth, interactional nature of methods such as interviews makes it possible to capture these important social processes in action. Thus, interpretive qualitative approaches enable researchers to understand how social norms and social status impact perceptions and evaluations of misinformation, and the ways in which these are informed by power relations, public discourses, identity, and sense-making. This nuanced work can also help explain the social origins of quantitatively measured phenomena like TPP. Furthermore, generating understandings not only of the credibility evaluation process but of the broader issue of how people make sense of misinformation as a social problem has important consequences for how we can tackle this issue (Eadon & Wood, 2025).

Studying misinformation through social media data analysis

As some public social media posts and behavioral data have become accessible, there has been a boom in studies that use such data to examine how misinformation spreads online, whom it reaches, and the reactions it provokes (e.g., Margolin et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023). Much of this research has involved collecting or "scraping" digital trace data from social media platforms for high-level computational analysis and visualization.

Computational analysis of digital trace data is certainly important for credibility research, helping scholars better understand the kinds of information shared on social media as well as how such information flows within and across social networks (e.g., Vosoughi et al., 2018), particularly when matched with survey data (Wojcieszak et al., 2024). Uncovering these patterns can play an important role in holding platforms to account (e.g., Funke, 2018). Furthermore, digital trace data can be analyzed qualitatively. Increasingly popular among digital methods advocates is what is being termed a "quanti-quali" approach, whereby exploratory computational scoping is followed by a focused qualitative (e.g., thematic or discursive) analysis of selected social media posts (Rogers, 2019). An example of this in the context of misinformation studies can be found in Kligler-Vilenchik's (2021) study of a large-scale WhatsApp group for discussing news and politics. Kligler-Vilenchik used quantitative content analysis to identify patterns of (mis)information verification in the group, followed by an in-depth qualitative analysis of the quantitatively identified instances of verification. This in-depth qualitative examination underscored how the process of (mis)information verification occurs collectively, shaped by group dynamics and norms.

At the same time, understanding the sense-making behind credibility evaluation on social media necessitates eliciting interpretations from users through traditional qualitative social research methods like interviews, focus groups, and ethnography. As research in audience reception studies has established (e.g., Eco, 1979; Hall, 1980), we cannot assume audience interpretations of media and information content from analysis of that content alone. Furthermore, digital trace data are not necessarily precise reflections of social reality but are shaped by the limitations of sampling or the context in which they were created or engaged with by audiences (Kitchin, 2017; Langlois & Elmer, 2013). For example, quantifiable "behavioral traces" such as likes, follows, or reshares are often informed by the logic and affordances imposed by each platform (van Dijck, 2013), platform norms and expectations, awareness of one's audience, and the expression of sarcasm and irony online (Fuchs & Schaffer, 2020; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Exclusively computational approaches may decontextualize these online acts and utterances, flattening the effects of social relationships, norms, and interactions, as well as the cultural, political, and personal context. Using interpretive qualitative methods becomes especially important when we consider that the completeness of some of the data social media companies make accessible to researchers has been thrown into doubt (see Allen et al., 2021), and such data are also becoming increasingly difficult to access for research.

Interpretive qualitative approaches can also be used in conjunction with computational analysis to generate complementary insights. For instance, while network analysis can tell us about how the strength of social ties impacts credibility evaluation (Margolin et al., 2018), combining this with in-depth interviews can reveal how trust and familiarity within specific interpersonal relationships impact credibility evaluation of misinformation in complex ways, as all of our projects show. As noted above, interpersonal networks play an important role in credibility evaluation, and interpretive qualitative methods help researchers explain how nuanced histories of specific relationships shape the extent to which interpersonal ties are viewed as credible sources of information.

Researchers can combine this interpretive qualitative approach with creative ways to access social media data to examine the issue of collective responsibility toward (mis)information in personal messaging groups. In Project 2, the media diary exercise between the two waves of interviews took the form of inviting participants to use a customized smartphone app to upload examples of online content sent or

received on personal messaging that they considered "accurate and helpful" or "false, inaccurate or misleading" (the definitions were left entirely to the participants). This meant posts were collected without scraping and without the ethically questionable undisclosed lurking in WhatsApp groups that has been used in other studies. Using a feature in the app that allowed participants to add a caption to the examples, as well as returning to these examples in the second wave of participant interviews, allowed the study to seek interpretations from users that contextualized the posts within their relationships and experiences. It also generated evaluations of the posts both in real-time and with hindsight. The reflections elicited in the interviews generated invaluable data about both the positive and negative impacts of group "rules" on the spread of misinformation, including how the trust placed in WhatsApp group administrators to enforce group "rules" and remove misleading content can end up contributing to misplaced credibility attributions (Chadwick et al, 2023). Scraping and analyzing conversations within personal messaging groups would have provided only a superficial snapshot of this phenomenon; as the same project has shown elsewhere, responses such as silence in these groups are difficult to fathom as measures of audience evaluations of information credibility (Chadwick et al., 2024). In contrast, iterative and exploratory processes of qualitative fieldwork, which build rapport with participants along the way, are well-equipped to uncover both the implicit trust placed in communicative settings and the consequences of such trust. What this case study demonstrates is that while many researchers may consider the inability to access and scrape content from platforms like WhatsApp a disadvantage, creative methods for linking social media content to user interpretations, in fact, offer distinct advantages. This issue of researcher access to encrypted platforms is also relevant to the study of credibility evaluation in BSMPs, which we turn to next.

Researching credibility evaluation in bounded social media places

BSMPs such as private groups and chats within messaging and social networking platforms are remarkably popular (Iyengar, 2022; Kemp, 2024; Malhotra, 2024, 2025; WhatsApp, 2020). These places are often used to engage with news and information (Murray et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2023), part of the broader shift toward engaging with news within online spaces located between the private and public domains (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020). Within BSMPs, users often receive news and information from close personal ties (Goh et al., 2019), such as family and friends (Kalogeropoulos, 2019). People therefore believe they receive personalized information (Masip et al., 2021), especially compared to algorithmically curated public social media feeds (Swart, 2021). As these close relationships are associated with increased trustworthiness and a stronger effect of the intermediary on information credibility (Samuel-Azran & Hayat, 2019), misinformation shared within these places may be believed by many users (Masip et al., 2021). For these reasons, BSMPs are a unique and important mediated context for credibility researchers. Indeed, all four of our projects focus on these places.

Yet, BSMPs have mostly been neglected in credibility research (c.f. Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). One reason may be that researchers primarily focus on mediated spaces popular in the United States (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2023). Additionally, the closed and private nature of BSMPs limits direct data collection. While researchers have navigated technical barriers by using AI or algorithms to collect messages from *public* groups on messaging platforms (Melo et al., 2019), they are unable to capture conversations in *private* groups. Even in public groups, collecting data raises ethical questions, considering users' expectations and understanding of their privacy within these groups (Herrada Hidalgo et al., 2024).

Given these issues, researchers need to rethink the methodological tools they use. In addition to data donation methods like the use of mobile apps discussed in the previous section, researchers need to focus on people's perceptions and behaviors while studying BSMPs (Rossini, 2023). Methods focusing on *people's experiences* are, therefore, suitable. This includes traditional social scientific quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys, experiments, interviews, and focus groups. In particular, interpretive methods help researchers recognize people's diverse interpretations of actions, occurrences, and experiences (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011).

It has also been suggested that a holistic understanding of people's behaviors and attitudes regarding BSMPs is best garnered by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Rossini, 2023). The utility of this is demonstrated in some of our projects. For instance, in Project 1, interview findings informed the design of a quantitative experiment that helped to complement and extend these findings. Interviewees underscored how they view BSMPs as private and intimate environments where familiar others share information, resulting in them viewing this information as credible. Thus, the interviews suggested that the low visibility and high intimacy associated with these places foster a sense of trust and credibility. These findings directly informed the design of a subsequent experiment, where the researchers tested the causal relationship between visibility, intimacy, and credibility by randomly assigning participants to a bounded private group or highly visible public group and asking them to assess the perceived intimacy of the group as well as the credibility of the same content posted in either group. The results showed that visibility, on its own, does not directly affect credibility; instead, when bounded places are perceived as intimate, messages are assessed as more credible. The insight that visibility, intimacy, and credibility act in concert in the modern social media environment emerged through giving interviewees space to articulate the multiple factors that influence how they assess credibility on social media. If the researchers had started with a quantitative approach, they might have only focused on visibility by simply comparing credibility assessment on private and public social media groups, failing to consider the mediating role of intimacy. This study demonstrates how interpretive qualitative insights can help researchers conduct more nuanced and informed quantitative research on credibility evaluation in BSMPs.

Another example of how the strengths of qualitative and quantitative approaches can be combined is Project 4, where each diary contained both open-ended qualitative questions and structured quantitative questions, including measures for source and message credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Sterrett et al., 2019). This way, participants were able to name the perceived sources of the information themselves while the quantitative measures enabled measuring their respective trustworthiness. Following this, the interviews

revealed the reasoning behind the credibility evaluations, and explored how the complex interplay between different sources impacts credibility assessment within private WhatsApp chats. Therefore, while the quantitative questions captured the assessment process in the moment it occurred, the qualitative components allowed participants to contextualize this assessment.

In another example, Project 2 combined interviews and media diaries with a nationally representative survey to examine attitudes toward WhatsApp's minimalistic misinformation labels—the "forwarded" and "forwarded many times" tags—among the U.K. public. In the interviews and diaries, participants revealed highly variegated and sometimes erroneous and counterproductive interpretations of what these intended anti-misinformation warnings mean (Hall et al., 2023b). By exploring the experiences of participants, the qualitative fieldwork was able to reveal not only the poor and confused awareness of the tags' intended meaning but also begin to explain how and why this is the case and the origins of erroneous interpretations, including what sort of forwards people actually tend to receive, or their knowledge of the overseas events that prompted the introduction of the tags. This enabled the researchers to make recommendations on how to make these types of tags more effective (Hall et al., 2023b). The researchers then investigated the prevalence of each of these interpretations in a nationally representative survey ($N = 2{,}000$). A novel multiple-response question asked respondents what they thought the tags indicated, with response modes based on the qualitative findings alongside the interpretations that WhatsApp said it intended with its anti-misinformation initiative (e.g., "Content that is currently popular on WhatsApp," "Jokes or satirical content," "Untrustworthy content," "Useful information," and "Important information"). The results confirmed the poor awareness of the tags' intended meaning among the U.K. public, thus, demonstrating for the first time the full scale of the ineffectiveness of WhatsApp's anti-misinformation strategy (Hall et al., 2024).

Methodological challenges—and some strategies to address them

While we have highlighted the unique strengths associated with adopting interpretive qualitative methods to study credibility, it is also important to acknowledge some key challenges. First, methods such as interviews and focus groups rely on participants self-reporting their behaviors. One limitation resulting from this is people's imperfect and partial memories. Another is that interviews and focus groups capture "not what people do, but rather what people say they think and do" (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014, p. 3), and these self-narratives can be impacted by social desirability biases. For instance, observational research finds that most people expend minimal cognitive effort while evaluating credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007); however, interview and focus group participants may feel the need to claim they follow a systematic, coherent, and cognitively effortful credibility evaluation process and give the impression that they adhere to the normative ideal of carefully scrutinizing online information. As noted above, these articulations are a worthy object of qualitative study in and of themselves (Hall et al., 2023a). Finally, there are inherent limitations associated with interpretive qualitative approaches when it comes to making causal claims and generalizing findings beyond a specific context.

At the same time, our projects and the other examples we have discussed offer methodological strategies to address some of these challenges. First, having participants engage in creative practices like card sorting exercises and mind map creation in conjunction with interviews encourages them to focus on specific aspects of the credibility evaluation process rather than simply articulating a generalized ideal. For example, Swart and Broersma (2022) had participants sort cards labelled with different political news sources along two dimensions—how frequently they use these sources and the extent to which they trust them. Having to sort these cards encouraged participants to reflect on the complicated, and at times contradictory, relationship between trust, credibility, and the frequency with which they engage with certain sources. Only asking about this in the context of an interview may have resulted in the socially acceptable answer that they use sources they trust—and that they only trust sources that the majority of the population say they trust.

Second, observing participants making in-the-moment credibility assessments and having them talk through these assessments can help researchers address the issue of memory recall. For instance, researchers have conducted think-aloud qualitative studies where participants scroll through online information in a laboratory setting while talking about how they are assessing its credibility (Geeng et al., 2020; Hargittai et al., 2010; Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018). This approach allows researchers to observe credibility evaluation in-the-moment rather than relying on imperfect self-reports about past experiences.

Third, researchers can capture how people assess information in their everyday social contexts by having participants complete daily media diaries detailing their credibility evaluation experiences as they happen. Interviews can then be used to allow participants to further contextualize these assessments, as seen in Projects 2, 3, and 4. This combination addresses the issue of recall bias while still giving participants space to freely articulate the nuances of their experiences. Furthermore, it gives participants the opportunity to discern between their in-the-moment assessments and how they reflect on assessing information *post hoc*.

Fourth, those studying credibility evaluation in BSMPs, where direct access to content is difficult, can combine interviews or focus groups with data donation methods, as in Project 2 (see pp. 8–9). This approach allows researchers to gain access to the content people share in these places while preserving participants' autonomy.

Fifth, qualitative research can be followed up with quantitative surveys and experiments to test the generalizability of findings and examine causal relationships between variables of interest identified in qualitative research, as outlined above in relation to Projects 1 (see p. 9) and 2 (see p. 10).

However, it is important to note that methods like qualitative interviews, on their own, also have unique strengths when employed skillfully. For example, rather than directly asking how participants distinguish between credible and inauthentic information (i.e., probing participants to report on behaviors), more revealing lines of qualitative questioning might center on relationships and meaning-making, including what credibility means to participants, the role played by cultural norms and assumptions, the different social actors people feel help them interpret information, and the nature of their relationships to these actors.

Conclusion

Based on existing literature and insights from our own research projects, we have demonstrated how interpretive qualitative approaches can help develop a more relationally, culturally, and contextually situated understanding of information credibility evaluation in digitally mediated spaces. In doing so, we have made four main arguments. First, interpretive qualitative methods add nuance to how credibility is conceptualized and operationalized: They help researchers better understand how people simultaneously evaluate the credibility of multiple objects of assessment. Second, these methods help researchers better understand the *process* of credibility evaluation as communicative, relational, and culturally situated. Third, these approaches are particularly useful to researchers studying how people engage with misinformation because they can best unearth subjective perceptions of what constitutes misinformation and help researchers understand why people might believe it. Finally, interpretive qualitative approaches are suitable for examining how people evaluate the credibility of information shared in BSMPs such as private chats on encrypted messaging apps, which are increasingly popular. In addition to these arguments, we have outlined concrete methodological strategies researchers can use to produce nuanced research on credibility. Overall, we present a systematic case for the methodological and theoretical value of using interpretive qualitative approaches to study credibility, detail research domains in which these approaches would be especially useful, and outline strategies for effectively employing these approaches.

In comparing interpretive qualitative methods to quantitative approaches that have dominated credibility research, we do not wish to add to strawman distinctions between interpretivism and positivist-behavioral approaches, pit a subjectivist stance against objectivity, or make value judgements about these paradigms. Instead, we agree with Anderson's (1996) argument that although interpretivists focus on subjective understandings, they identify collective patterns of meaning-making within a particular context. This meaning-making, we argue, is important to study as it helps researchers understand how people draw on their culture and the interpersonal networks around them to assess information. We have also highlighted ways in which interpretation and measurement can complement each other, helping researchers acquire a more holistic understanding of credibility evaluation. At the same time, we want to avoid perpetuating the idea that interpretive qualitative research only exists to "serve" quantitative research. We emphasize the unique strengths of adopting interpretive qualitative approaches to studying credibility evaluation. This is important because qualitative research continues to be undervalued in important subfields such as political communication (Karpf et al., 2015), where much of the research on credibility and misinformation has been situated (Xia, 2021).

In highlighting our approach's strengths, we extend to new contexts the rich tradition of media reception studies, where ethnographic research has been championed because it enables researchers to highlight how audiences exercise agency while interpreting media (Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 2010, 2015). We argue that digital media users do not passively consume information, but draw on personal, interpersonal, and cultural resources to actively assess its credibility. Greater engagement with reception studies can advance the study of credibility in further ways. For example, reception studies scholars have focused on how structural factors like gender and class impact how people interpret media (Morley, 2003; Radway, 1984). In conducting our own projects, we did not fully capture how social stratification and inequality shape the interpretive process of credibility evaluation. In a context of growing institutional distrust, we call on researchers conducting interpretive qualitative work to focus on how race and social class impact credibility evaluation and to conduct fieldwork among groups that are traditionally difficult to reach.

Future research should also extend our attempts to examine credibility evaluation in diverse geographic and cultural contexts. Research on these issues has predominantly focused on contexts within the Global North, underplaying how credibility evaluation may play out differently across diverse Global South contexts (Badrinathan & Chauchard, 2023) and within diasporic communities in different parts of the world (Nguyễn et al., 2022). As our projects have demonstrated, interpretive qualitative approaches complicate established ways of understanding credibility evaluation rooted in quantitative research conducted in the Global North. Furthermore, there is scope for comparative qualitative research on credibility evaluation across different regions. Researchers can conduct small-N, contextually focused comparative studies, an approach that Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2018) label contextualism. Indeed, in our own research projects across diverse contexts, we find similarities and subtle differences in how credibility is understood and assessed in digitally mediated spaces.

In addition to these implications for future research, our article also has implications for how policy makers and the general public address the issue of misinformation. As much as we should resist alarmist narratives about misinformation and uncritical uses of the term, recent developments—the emergence of generative AI, public health emergencies, climate change, and new geopolitical conflicts—have rightly raised concerns about how people assess the veracity of online information. However, it is now becoming clear that there is no magic bullet intervention that will help all people accurately gauge information credibility (Marwick, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2021). Instead, as Lee et al. (2023) argue, interventions that account for specific social groups' histories, cultural values, and everyday practices have a greater chance of succeeding. For example, they note that interventions targeting the Black community in the United States must acknowledge how distrust in health institutions due to a long history of medical racism can impact how people from this community assess the credibility of health information. We argue that interpretive qualitative methods can enhance our understanding of how such historically and culturally situated factors impact credibility evaluation, paving the way for the design of more sensitive interventions.

To conclude, interpretive qualitative methods have much to offer the study of credibility evaluation and can significantly advance understanding of how different social actors navigate the contemporary online environment.

Data availability

This manuscript is a theoretical and methodological review piece in which the authors reflect on their past experience of conducting empirical research on credibility as part of diverse

research projects. This manuscript does not involve the generation and analysis of any new empirical data.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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