



Effects of Fact-Checking News Characteristics on User Interaction

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Abstract. As social media has become a major channel for information dissemination, while accelerating the flow of information, it has also facilitated the spread of false information, making fact-checking news play an increasingly crucial role in combating false information. This study focuses on exploring how the three key characteristics of fact-checking news - the content theme, the authority of the source, and the verification conclusion - jointly influence users' interactive behaviors. An online experiment with a group design was conducted. Chinese social media active users were recruited as participants through the Credamo platform. The research results show that, first of all, authoritative sources with high authority, refuted conclusions, and news related to politics and health can all trigger more positive user interaction intentions. Secondly, the authority of the source plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between the verification conclusion and the interactive behavior. This study has revealed the causal mechanism between the characteristics of fact-checking news and user interaction behaviors. It not only deepens our understanding of the information processing behaviors of social media users, but also provides specific empirical evidence for fact-checking institutions to optimize their content production and dissemination strategies. This is of great significance for improving the quality of the online public information environment.

Keywords: Fact Checking, User Interaction, Source Credibility, Social Media.

1 Introduction

This study focuses on the current reality of the rampant spread of false information in the era of social media [1]. With the rapid development of social platforms, information dissemination has become characterized by immediacy and wide reach, but it also faces severe challenges such as uneven information quality and the rapid spread of false content. In this context, fact-checking news, as an important mechanism for combating false information and improving the quality of information, has gradually evolved from a single step in the traditional news production process to an independent and innovative news genre [2]. This process demonstrates the adaptability and innovation of the journalism industry to the social media ecosystem, and also reflects the growing demand of the public for reliable information. However, empirical observations have shown that the dissemination effect of fact-checking news varies significantly, and the

user interaction rate of such news exhibits notable fluctuations [3]. The instability of this effect has drawn widespread attention from the academic community: Why do some fact-checking content manage to gain widespread dissemination and positive interaction, while other content fails to attract users' attention? The solution to this problem holds significant theoretical value and practical significance for fully leveraging the fact-checking function of rumor debunking and optimizing the public information dissemination ecosystem [4]. Systematically exploring the key factors that influence the effectiveness of its dissemination not only helps to understand the cognitive and behavioral patterns of users in the social media environment, but also provides scientific guidance for fact-checking practices.

This research mainly focuses on exploring the core issue of how the interaction between the three key characteristics - the content theme of the news, the authority of the source, and the verification conclusion - jointly affects users' interactive behaviors. To precisely examine the causal relationship between variables, this study employed a controlled experimental research method. Recent work highlights the effectiveness of large-scale online experiments for isolating the causal effects of message features on digital engagement, demonstrating their ecological validity in social media contexts [5]. Specifically, it adopted a between-group experimental design with the following factors: 2 (Source Authority: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Verification Conclusion: Refutation vs. Confirmation) \times 3 (Content Theme: Politics vs. Health vs. Technology). Through a professional online experimental platform, we recruited 600 active social media users who met the screening criteria to participate in the experiment and collected high-quality behavioral data.

2 Background

Fact-checking news is a news genre that assesses the validity of claims or assertions made by public figures and institutions through a systematic approach. It is different from the fact-checking process in traditional news production. Instead, it is a final news product formed after verifying publicly stated opinions. The global fact-checking movement has flourished, with a significant increase in the number of institutions. The scope of verification has expanded from the initial focus on politicians' statements to cover a wide range of topics such as health and science. In China, fact-checking practices take various forms, including official rumor-busting platforms like "China Internet Joint Rumor-Dissemination Platform", media verification columns like "Clear Investigation" on PENG PAI, and platform self-governance functions such as "User Complaints" on Weibo [6].

User interaction behaviors are the key indicators for measuring the effectiveness of social media content dissemination, mainly including behaviors such as forwarding, liking, and commenting [7]. Among them, forwarding represents the diffusion and recognition of information, liking is a low-cost positive feedback, and comments reflect deeper cognition and emotional investment. To systematically understand the psychological mechanisms behind these behaviors, this study integrates the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Heuristic-Systematic Model

(HSM). TPB holds that behavioral intention is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control; while HSM indicates that users' decisions rely on both simple cues and deep information processing. Based on this, this paper hypothesizes that users' interaction behaviors are simultaneously influenced by both information characteristics and source characteristics [8].

Empirical research has shown that the specific characteristics of fact-checking news systematically affect its dissemination effect. Firstly, the authority of the source serves as an important heuristic cue, which can significantly enhance users' perception of trust in the information, thereby effectively increasing their willingness to interact. For instance, verified reports from mainstream media usually receive more attention than content from unknown sources [9]. Recent research by Chen et al. further confirms that source credibility significantly influences the sharing intention of fact-checking message, especially when combined with emotionally engaging content [10]. Secondly, the type of verification conclusion has a significant impact on user reactions. "Refutation" type conclusions (such as rumor debunking) tend to elicit stronger emotional responses and more interactive behaviors than "confirmation" type conclusions [11]. Vraga & Bode also found that corrective information (refutation) is more effective in reducing misperceptions and influencing sharing intentions compared to confirmatory messages [12]. Furthermore, the selection of the content theme is also of great significance. Themes related to personal health or political identity, which involve high levels of engagement, are more likely to attract significant attention and evoke emotional resonance, thereby triggering more interactions. Finally, in terms of presentation format and discourse style, an approachable discourse style and multimedia forms may enhance the attractiveness of the content, while professional and objective statements are more conducive to maintaining the credibility of the information. The two present a certain tension relationship in terms of communication effectiveness [13]. However, there is a significant limitation in the existing research: most studies focus solely on the independent influence of the main effect, and fail to conduct in-depth exploration of the interaction effects between different features. For instance, does the high-authority source as a heuristic clue amplify the facilitating effect of the "refuted" conclusion on the interactive behavior? Does this potential amplification effect vary depending on the content theme? These questions regarding the mechanism of multi-feature synergy have not been fully answered yet, and clarifying these complex causal relationships is crucial for optimizing the dissemination strategy of fact-checking news. This study aims to fill this research gap through a controlled experiment.

3 Research Methods

3.1 Experimental Design

This study employed a three-factor between-subjects experimental design with 2 (Source Authority: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Verification Conclusion: Refutation vs. Confirmation) \times 3 (Content Theme: Politics vs. Health vs. Technology). The dependent variable of the experiment is the users' interactive behavior towards fact-checking news. It is mainly measured through three dimensions: Firstly, the intention to forward and the

intention to like. Both of these variables are measured using a well-established 7-point Likert scale (1 represents "very unlikely", and 7 represents "very likely"). Secondly, the sentiment of the comments is analyzed. Text data is collected through the open-ended question "Please write your comment", and then two trained coders independently code the data according to the preset sentiment categories (positive, negative, neutral). Furthermore, in order to mitigate the influence of potential confounding factors, this study also included demographic variables such as age, gender, educational level, and frequency of social media usage as control variables in the analytical framework. In terms of the operationalization of the independent variables, this study was systematically designed. Firstly, the variable of source authority was manipulated through the identity characteristics of the Weibo account: In the high-authority condition, the official logo and ID of "CCTV News" were used, while in the low-authority condition, the imitation marketing account "Daily Curious News Briefings" logo was employed. This operation was based on the research framework on the credibility of information sources by Metzger et al. [11]. Secondly, the manipulation of the verification conclusion is achieved through the use of title keywords: the refutation conditions are expressed with terms like "denying rumors" and "the online claims are untrue", while the confirmation conditions employ expressions such as "the situation is true" and "hereby confirmed". This design is based on research on the effectiveness of corrective information [13]. Finally, the content theme covers three main areas: political (such as verification of political figures' statements), health (such as food safety rumors), and technology (such as product technology rumors), in order to examine the differential effects in different information domains. In terms of the measurement of the dependent variable, this study employed a diversified measurement strategy. The measurement of forwarding intention and liking intention drew on the research of Hayes et al. on social media interaction behaviors, using a standardized 7-point Likert scale [8]. The measurement of comment sentiment adopted a qualitative research method, collecting raw data through open-ended questions and then conducting systematic content analysis. This method has unique advantages in examining users' deep cognition and emotional responses [14]. To ensure the validity of the experimental manipulation, this study has established a strict operational inspection procedure. Specifically, immediately after the experiment, the participants' perception of the authority of the source, their recognition of the verification conclusion, and their understanding of the content theme were measured. At the same time, by collecting detailed demographic variables and data on social media usage habits, a necessary foundation was provided for subsequent statistical control and analysis.

3.2 Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, this study proposes the following research hypotheses:

Firstly, regarding the impact of content topics on user interaction behaviors, this study hypothesizes that compared to technology-related topics, fact-checking news covering political (H1a) and health (H1b) topics will elicit a higher intention to share from users.

The fact-checking news released by high-authority sources not only elicits a higher intention to like from users (H2a), but also prompts users to adopt a more neutral comment sentiment (H2b) compared to news from low-authority sources.

The fact-checking news with a conclusion of "disproof" can elicit a higher intention for sharing (H3a) and liking (H3b) from users compared to the news with a conclusion of "confirmation".

3.3 Experimental Procedure

Using the Credamo platform, quota sampling (based on age, gender, and city level) was employed to recruit 600 active adult Chinese social media users (aged 18-55). It was ensured that each experimental group had 50 participants. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the 12 experimental groups.

The experimental procedure of this study strictly adhered to academic ethical standards and employed standardized procedures. First of all, before the experiment officially begins, all participants are required to read and sign the informed consent form, fully understanding the research purpose, data usage, and privacy protection measures. Subsequently, the system employed a random allocation mechanism, ensuring that each participant was exposed only to one type of experimental stimulus material – that is, a set of strictly controlled "microblog post" screenshots. To ensure the basic effectiveness of information reception, the system set a minimum reading time of 30 seconds, after which the "Next" button would become active. After the stimulus exposure stage is over, the program immediately proceeds to the variable measurement phase. Participants are required to answer 7-point Likert scale questions about the intention to forward and the intention to like in sequence, and complete an open-ended comment question. Subsequently, in order to ensure the validity of the experimental manipulation, specific operational inspection items were set up to verify whether the participants' perception of the source characteristics, the type and content theme of the verification conclusion was consistent with the experimental design. Finally, participants are required to provide basic demographic information such as age, gender, and educational level. The entire process is carried out sequentially on the online experimental platform, taking approximately 8-10 minutes on average. All data are collected and stored anonymously.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed SPSS 26.0 statistical software to conduct a systematic analysis of the experimental data. Firstly, to ensure the validity of the experimental manipulation, an independent sample t-test will be used to compare the perception differences among participants from different authoritative source groups. At the same time, a chi-square test will be employed to verify the accuracy rate of participants in identifying the verification conclusion and the content theme. This basic step will provide a reliable foundation for the subsequent analysis. Based on this, the study will employ three-way ANOVA as the main statistical method to systematically examine the main effects of the three independent variables - source authority, verification conclusion, and content

theme - on continuous dependent variables such as forwarding intention and liking intention, as well as the interaction effects among these factors, in order to reveal the complex relationships among the variables. Furthermore, for the comment content collected through open-ended questions, the SnowNLP library in the Python environment will be used for sentiment analysis. The text data will be transformed into continuous sentiment scores, which will then be incorporated into the variance analysis framework for statistical testing. This way, the effective combination of qualitative materials and quantitative analysis can be achieved. This multi-level analysis method will ensure a comprehensive examination of the research hypotheses from different perspectives.

4 Research Results

This study collected 600 valid data through an online experimental platform. Firstly, we tested the effectiveness of the operational manipulation. The independent sample t-test showed that the high-authority source group ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.11$) gave significantly higher ratings of the source's authority than the low-authority source group ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(598) = 15.37$, $p < 0.001$. The chi-square test indicated that the participants were able to correctly identify the verification conclusions ($\chi^2(3) = 521.44$, $p < 0.001$) and the content themes ($\chi^2(2) = 498.72$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the experimental manipulation was successful. Subsequently, a three-factor analysis of variance (Three-way ANOVA) was conducted to test the main effects and interaction effects.

4.1 Main Effect Analysis

The content theme has a significant main effect on the intention to forward ($F(2,588) = 18.32$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc tests (LSD) revealed that the intention to forward for the political theme ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.21$) and the health theme ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.18$) were significantly higher than that for the technology theme ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.40$) ($p < 0.001$), supporting H1a and H1b.

The authority of the source has a significant main effect on the intention to like ($F(1,588) = 45.67$, $p < 0.001$). The intention to like of high-authority sources ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.05$) is significantly higher than that of low-authority sources ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.32$), supporting H2a. However, the influence on the sentiment of comments is not significant ($F(1,588) = 2.98$, $p = 0.085$), and H2b is not supported.

The verification conclusion had significant main effects on the intention to forward ($F(1,588) = 30.15$, $p < 0.001$) and the intention to like ($F(1,588) = 25.44$, $p < 0.001$). The scores of the refuted conclusion (intention to forward $M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.25$; intention to like $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.20$) were significantly higher than those of the confirmed conclusion (intention to forward $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.38$; intention to like $M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.25$). H3a and H3b were supported.

4.2 Interaction Effect Analysis

The authority of the source and the verification conclusion both exhibited significant second-order interaction effects on the intention to forward ($F(1,588) = 6.54, p = 0.011$) and the intention to like ($F(1,588) = 4.89, p = 0.027$). The simple effect analysis indicates that for news that refutes a conclusion, the enhancement effect of high-authority sources on the interaction intention (forwarding: $M=5.82, SD=0.95$; liking: $M=5.70, SD=0.88$) is significantly stronger than that of low-authority sources (forwarding: $M=5.02, SD=1.32$; liking: $M=4.90, SD=1.35$) ($p < 0.001$). However, for news that confirms a conclusion, there is no significant difference between high-authority sources (forwarding: $M=4.88, SD=1.25$; liking: $M=5.05, SD=1.15$) and low-authority sources (forwarding: $M=4.65, SD=1.45$; liking: $M=4.72, SD=1.30$) ($p > 0.05$). H4a is supported, while H4b is partially supported (only having a moderating effect on the interaction intention).

The interaction effects between the content theme and other independent variables are not significant ($p > 0.05$).

According to the results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA), the content theme had a significant impact on the intention to forward ($F = 18.32, p < 0.001$), with an effect size of 0.059, supporting H1; while the impact on the intention to like was not significant ($F = 2.15, p = 0.117$). The authority of the source had a significant impact on both the intention to forward and the intention to like ($F = 35.18, p < 0.001$; $F = 45.67, p < 0.001$), and the result for the intention to like supported H2a. The verification conclusion also significantly affected the intention to forward and the intention to like ($F = 30.15, p < 0.001$; $F = 25.44, p < 0.001$), respectively supporting H3a and H3b. Additionally, the interaction effect between the authority of the source and the verification conclusion was significant in both the intention to forward and the intention to like ($F = 6.54, p = 0.011$; $F = 4.89, p = 0.027$), with effect sizes of 0.011 and 0.008, respectively, supporting H4a, indicating that both have a moderating effect on the interaction intention. The interaction effect between the content theme and other independent variables was not significant ($p > 0.05$).

4.3 Summary

This study systematically examined the influence of the three key characteristics of fact-checking news (content topic, source authority, and verification conclusion) on user interaction behaviors through a controlled experiment. The main findings are as follows: Firstly, the content theme significantly influences the intention to share. Political and health topics, due to their high relevance and emotional engagement, elicit stronger dissemination intentions than technological topics. This is consistent with previous research. Secondly, the authority of the source significantly influences the intention to like. High-authority sources (such as mainstream media) serve as powerful heuristic cues, which can enhance user trust and thereby lead to more positive feedback. Thirdly, the type of verification conclusion significantly influences the intention of interaction. The “refutation” conclusion (i.e., rumor-debunking content) is more likely to stimulate users’ sharing and liking behaviors due to its characteristics of correcting

cognitive errors and providing a sense of moral satisfaction, which is consistent with existing research findings [15]. Fourthly, the authority of the source moderates the effect of the verification conclusion. For refutation-type news, high-authority sources can greatly enhance its interaction effect, which reveals the interaction between heuristic cues and systematic processing.

5 Discussion

Based on the aforementioned research results, the discussion of this study mainly focuses on two aspects: theoretical contributions and practical applications.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this study, through rigorous experimental design, verified and expanded the explanatory boundaries of the heuristic-systemic model in the field of social media news dissemination. The research results indicate that users' interaction decisions do not solely rely on either heuristic or systematic processing paths, but rather exhibit a complex mechanism of dual-path synergy. Specifically, authoritative high-reputation sources serve as powerful heuristic cues, significantly amplifying the positive effect of the systematic processing of content on users' interaction behaviors. This discovery not only confirms the applicability of the HSM theory in the specific information type of fact-checking, but also reveals the synergistic enhancement effect between heuristic cues and systematic processing content, providing a new theoretical perspective for understanding the psychological mechanism of users' information processing in the social media environment.

In terms of practice, this study provides actionable optimization suggestions for fact-checking institutions and related platforms. Firstly, in terms of source strategy, a differentiated source allocation mechanism should be established. For rumors related to significant public interests such as health and politics, the verification conclusions should be released first by authoritative official media, thereby maximizing their dissemination effectiveness and credibility. Secondly, at the content production level, emphasis should be placed on the clarity of conclusions and the transparency of evidence. Key conclusion information such as "denial" and "disproof" should be prominently displayed in the title and body, and the data source and verification process should be clearly presented to meet users' cognitive needs and stimulate their sense of moral satisfaction. Finally, in terms of communication strategies, multimedia forms can be considered to enhance the attractiveness of the content. While maintaining a professional and objective tone, more narrative elements that are more likely to resonate can be moderately integrated to balance the professionalism and communication power of the content [6].

However, this study still has some areas that need improvement. Firstly, although the experimental samples were recruited through an online platform, they were not completely randomly sampled. Future research could seek more diverse sources of samples to enhance the generalizability of the results. For instance, leveraging large-scale platform data as done in Liu et al. could be a promising direction [16]. Secondly, there are differences between the laboratory environment and the actual social media dynamic information flow. Subsequent research could adopt field experiments or big data

tracking methods to verify the ecological validity of the research conclusions under conditions closer to real scenarios. Additionally, this study mainly measures users' behavioral intentions. In the future, objective behavioral data such as eye movement tracking and click rates could be combined to more comprehensively reveal the underlying mechanisms of users' interaction behaviors. Finally, the study has not yet addressed the moderating role of individual characteristics of users (such as cognitive needs, political tendencies, etc.). This provides a valuable direction for future exploration of the boundary conditions that affect the effectiveness of fact-checking dissemination.

6 Conclusion

This study systematically verified through a controlled experiment the significant influence of three key features of fact-checking news - the content theme, the authority of the source, and the verification conclusion - on users' interaction behaviors. The research results indicated that political and health topics, high-authority sources, and refuted conclusions could effectively enhance users' intention to forward and like. Moreover, the authority of the source had a significant moderating effect on the dissemination effect of the verification conclusion. Thus, the further conclusion drawn from this study is that the dissemination effect of fact-checking news is influenced by both the characteristics of the information content and the characteristics of the source, and the two factors have a synergistic enhancing effect. This provides new empirical evidence for understanding the information processing mechanism of users in the social media environment.

This research provides valuable reference significance for future studies in this field. It mainly affects two aspects: at the theoretical level, the study has confirmed the applicability of the heuristic-systemic model in explaining the effect of fact-checking news dissemination, and revealed the interaction mechanism between heuristic cues and systematic processing; at the practical level, it provides specific guidance for fact-checking institutions to optimize their content production and dissemination strategies, such as establishing differentiated source allocation mechanisms and strengthening the presentation of refuted conclusions.

However, this study still has some areas that need improvement. Firstly, although the experimental samples were recruited through an online platform, they were not completely randomly sampled. Future research could seek more diverse sources of samples to enhance the generalizability of the results. Secondly, there are differences between the laboratory environment and the actual social media dynamic information flow. Subsequent research could adopt field experiments or big data tracking methods to verify the ecological validity of the research conclusions under conditions closer to real scenarios. Additionally, this study mainly measures users' behavioral intentions. In the future, objective behavioral data such as eye movement tracking and click rates could be combined to more comprehensively reveal the underlying mechanisms of users' interaction behaviors. Finally, the study has not yet addressed the moderating role of individual characteristics of users (such as cognitive needs, political tendencies, etc.).

This provides a valuable direction for future exploration of the boundary conditions that affect the effectiveness of fact-checking dissemination.

Future research should focus more on the following directions for in-depth exploration: Firstly, the research can be conducted in more realistic social environments, such as through on-site experiments or big data tracking methods to verify the ecological validity of the research conclusions; Secondly, more diverse measurement indicators can be introduced, such as combining eye-tracking or actual click data to more comprehensively reveal the user behavior mechanism; Finally, the moderating effect of individual user characteristics on the effectiveness of fact-checking dissemination can also be examined to improve the existing theoretical model. Through continuous and in-depth exploration, it will help to build a more complete theory system for fact-checking dissemination and provide continuous theoretical support and practical guidance for creating a clean online space.

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