

The Psychological Impact of Unofficial News on Young Female Adults' Attitudes and Perceptions in China

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Abstract. The quick growth of big data media and the extensive adoption of social media in China have had a profound effect on young individuals' perspectives and understanding of their surroundings. It is against this background that the paper seeks to investigate the psychological effects of unofficial news media on young individuals' attitudes and cognitions in China. Since young individuals between 18-25 years belong to a critical age at which they can have high interactions with their surroundings and form their attitudes, they can easily be affected by the information they receive online. Although there is extensive knowledge offered to determine the effects of information offered in news media on the cognition and attitude of many individuals, there is little attention paid to determine the effects of news media on the cognition and attitude of young individuals. This is because the type of information offered in news media may not always be accurate. This research adopted a substantive method involving six 18-25-year-old young female respondents to determine their attitudes against both formal and informal news media. This paper shall adopt thematic analysis to interpret the data. Among the themes the paper shall adopt include faith in news media with respect to subjective factors, emotional responses to reading informal news media information, effects of formal news media on attitudes towards power influence, and critical thinking skills within prolonged interactions with extensive information offered in formal news media. This paper provides crucial observations with regard to the implications of information offered in media illustrated in media courses. It also spells out the current forces that form the psychological makeup of 18-25-year-old Chinese female adolescents.

Keywords: unofficial news, media trust, emotional response, attitude change, critical thinking

1. Introduction

Effects of big data, combined with the intensive information flow across web pages and vast increase in informational materials, have comprehensively transformed traditional processes of information acquisition and verification. Social media platforms provide open flow of information with no hindrance, while mainstream news media provide stringent controls and editorial approaches. This open spreading of information with no hindrance has been a serious concern in society given its harm potential to public debate, belief framework, and psychological well-being [1,

2]. Young adults, usually an emotively charged group, are at a sensitive point during their process to form a sense of self and values [3]. Their interaction with a wide series of social media applications, such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, exposes them to an excessive amount of misinformation. The effect can have the potential to change their views on social trust and emotional stability [4].

Existing psychology studies on information spreading have been extensively explored to determine the effects of misinformation or fake news on individuals' cognition and emotional responses. A close review indicates that when misinformation is encountered, confusion, anger, and fear emerge, leading to mistrust of media and related institutions [5]. A similar empirical survey conducted among Chinese university students indicated that increased encounters with misinformation raise levels of anxiety and mistrust of traditional media outlets [6]. Although such studies have offered insight into the collective effects of misinformation, there have been no direct investigations of unofficial news. This is information that is not conveyed through institutional means but is still deemed credible or important.

Trust in the media in China is affected by factors such as inter-generational variations, institutional arrangements, and culture. Du identifies that the younger generation is becoming less trusting of formal media sources and is increasingly dependent on alternative online information [7]. Further adding to the discussion is the argument presented by Ye that there is a "trust crisis" among the Chinese people and particularly young women, with their information increasingly depending on alternative information generated or commented on by fellow users rather than formal media [8].

Owing to such trends, this paper aims to target young female adults between 18-25 years of age with a bachelor's degree or above in China to examine the effects of alternative news media on their attitudes and emotional responses. This paper will answer the following questions: 1. How do young women regard the credibility of alternative news media as compared to formal news media? 2. What emotional and attitude responses can be garnered from alternative news media? 3. To what level does repeated exposure influence critical appraisals and trust towards media and society?

With the above questions in mind, this paper seeks to contribute to the psychological theories of information processing and media trust within online information communities. Not only does it provide implications for media literacy education in this context, but it also highlights the need to empower young female individuals to have critical and responsible attitudes towards online information processing.

2. Literature review

As social media spaces continue to be increasingly embedded in our everyday lives, the distinction between information and disinformation is no longer sharp and clear. While "official" information is known to come from verified or formal sources with standards for verification and truth-telling goals, "unofficial" information is usually characterized as coming from users or social media sites. According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling, "fake news" is described as information that imitates the pattern of legitimate news writing but does not have verification or truthful intent [2]. Expounding on the above-mentioned construct, Balakrishnan et al. reinforce that although there is no truth to information not verified, it contributes to a larger issue related to the "information epidemic," assigning subjective truth to emotionally charged narratives [1].

In China, the rise of social media led by top platforms like Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin has accelerated the spread of unofficial content. These social medias gain attention by spreading unsubstantiated information, which consequently implies that there is a higher likelihood of seeing information that is sensational and not necessarily true. There is a marked difference in confidence between official and unofficial news in China, according to studies [7, 8]. This is most true among

younger generations, whereby official medias are received as too controlled or slow in responding to breaking news [7, 8]. Although we know that unofficial news may potentially have inaccuracies or not be reliable, this is still an integral way that individuals are able to receive information promptly.

To comprehend the psychological processes that direct individuals' responses to unofficial information, we must be familiar with two theoretical frameworks: information processing and attitude forming. In conformity with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), persuasion information is processed with two routes by individuals: the central route, with analytical and effortful thinking, and the peripheral route, with a heuristic and emotion-driven mechanism. When individuals are unable or not motivated to evaluate information for truthfulness, they will rely on peripheral information—it or familiarity with the information informing source—to form their judgment [5, 9]. Deep analysis with studies on misinformation by Broda reveals that narrative cohesion and emotive appeal frequently defeat factually correct information in perception-based judgments of credibility [8].

Another study also determined that psychological traits, including cognitive laziness, confirmation bias, and anxiety sensitivity, make individuals believe untrue or unofficial news [1]. Arousal is also a motivator and a bias; information that arouses interesting emotions is typically more shareable and memorable. Researchers determined that Chinese college undergrads, and especially young adult women, demonstrated a spectrum of emotions in response to fake news, such as curiosity, fear, and worry. Consequently, this gives birth to a loss of confidence in the conventional information providers [6]. In conclusion, the above studies show that unofficial news employs emotional and cognitive heuristics to influence individuals' perceptions about society and social problems.

For young female adults, media trust is the predominant element influencing their choice of information sources. It is proposed that there is variance in the level of belief among the Chinese media-believing community according to age. The elderly believe in institutional media during their pursuit of stability. Even younger people have high levels of belief in web influencers [7]. This creates a reflection of the mirror image because of the emotional/cultural concerns among young female adults, because of their intense engagement with social media as a means of expression and support. Their open emotivism makes them vulnerable to the belief of untrue information if it resonates with their emotions or fears of potential danger [5].

International studies have identified gender-dependent behavior with regard to media. A Scoping Review, examining the young generations' attitude towards misinformation, identified that their engagement with misinformation usually results in emotional reactions such as anxiety, confusion, or skepticism among the more vulnerable groups [10]. It is evident that women consider individual trust and belonging to a community to be more crucial factors than information credibility. This inclination causes them to be willing to accept informal information distributed through social media. This study points out the importance of understanding the interactions between gender, trust, and emotional processing in extensive media environments, especially in China, with its unique culture that shapes the young generations' attitudes towards power and truth.

Unofficial news can alter the way people think, but it can also increase their awareness and critical thinking. It is evident that if people continue to be exposed to contradictory information repeatedly, there is potential to encourage people to apply critical methods of evaluation [6]. Broda again identifies that the viewers are not merely passive recipients because they can recognize attempts to manipulate them either through emotional exhaustion or mental adjustment [5]. This is particularly evident among young females in China because the increased emotional reactions trigger critical thinkers to adopt a critical mindset.

The balance between critical thinking and emotional openness is exceedingly delicate. Elaboration Likelihood Model theory states that the persuasion effectiveness of unofficial news is increased with increased emotional involvement compared to cognitive analysis [9]. So, media education for young adult women should focus on both verification of fact and regulation of emotion, in order to guide them in identifying under what situations empathy, fear, or anger will impair their ability to judge and how they can successfully regulate them.

Generally speaking, unofficial news greatly influences the mind of a person because it creates their emotions and enables their quick thinking. These influences can be felt greatly among the young women of China because they are well aware of the demands laid upon them by society. Although studies have examined the topic of misinformation and fake news comprehensively in the current scenario, there is a need to conduct a study to ascertain the emotional and cognitive influences of unofficial yet credible information on the young women of China. This paper aims to examine such phenomena with the help of the refined likelihood model (ELM) and media trust theories.

3. Methodology

It employs a qualitative semi-structured interviewing approach to investigate the impact unofficial social media spread has had on the cognitive perception, affective response, and media trust within Chinese female adults. This was taken as a means to study subjects' thinking process, their experiences, and the value attached to unofficial and official information in the contextual framework. As discussed earlier, modern information is messy, disarticulated, and emotively complex, requiring interpretive approaches based on either statistical trends [2, 6].

A total of six female undergraduate students participated in this research. Their age ranged between 18-25 years. Their educational background includes at least a bachelor's level of education. These students were invited to participate in this research through convenience sampling on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media site. These students included two undergraduate students pursuing their education full-time, two recent college graduates with a job either full-time or part-time, and two graduate candidates.

All of them were active users of social media services like Weibo, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, and WeChat Moments. Each one of them spends at least 2 to 8 hours per day on social media. The sample collection aims to ensure the representativeness of young Chinese women's lifestyle and their usage of digital media. Arnett points out the 18-25 year-old age range as the era of identity and value exploration [3]. All the subjects were voluntarily chosen for participation in this research. Nothing that could reveal their identities is written in the recorded interviews.

The interview includes 11 open-ended core questions that have been developed using existing literature related to media trust [7], information processing & emotional reactions [4, 5], and social cognition & attitudes towards misinformation [9]. These questions allow discussion to revolve around the following four themes: 1. Trust & Perception - How respondents differentiate between official and unofficial news sources and prefer one over the other. 2. Emotional Reactions - Their feelings during and after reading or seeing unofficial information, such as feeling curious or anxious. 3. Attitude & Behavioral Changes - How their attitude or behavior is affected or not affected due to reading unofficial news. 4. Critical Awareness - Their understanding or awareness related to information verification and media literacy learning. Some sample questions include: "Please tell me your first impression upon seeing the post with unofficial news." "Do you prefer one type of news over another or prefer one type of news over? Why?" "Has a situation ever occurred when you tried to check if the information was accurate or not in unofficial news? How did you check it if you

did?” Actually, which type of news source do you trust more - Official or Unofficial? Why?” and “Has a situation ever occurred when you tried to check if information is accurate or not in Unofficial News? How did you check it if you did?” Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes and took place on online video calls. All the interviews conducted had been recorded and then transcribed with direct quotes in Chinese.

Data collection was done over a period of two weeks in September 2025. Before participation, every individual received a short introductory written explanation and agreed to take part. Conversational-style interviews were done to allow the participant to open up and reveal their emotions.

In the course of the interview session, the respondents were asked to recall instances of news events they had encountered online. These could include cases such as scandals involving celebrities, gender issues, or rumors associated with politics. The researchers then went on to pose exploratory questions to them.

Interviewers adopted a neutral and non-judgmental attitude with empathy to allow the respondents to reflect freely on their emotional and cognitive reactions. At the same time, the researchers recorded the tone and emphasis of the respondents to help in understanding their responses.

Data analysis involved the use of thematic analysis following a six-step process articulated by Braun and Clarke: Familiarization with data, coding, production of themes, evaluation of themes, refinement of themes, and writing-up [11]. This is because it allowed them to identify patterns among the subjective experiences they have encountered in their data.

After transcription, the responses to the interview questions were all imported for coding. This coding exercise adopted an inductive process whereby themes were developed out of the data itself and not categorized into existing themes. This coding activity is informed by conceptual frameworks related to the Petty Likelihood Model and Du's Media Trust Theory in [7, 9, 12].

A total of six interviews have identified four core themes of the proposed research

1. Trust and Skepticism - Participants not only rely on information presented on social media sites but also question it. Generally, they believe in information that is emotionally truthful and presented to them by their peers, even if they have doubts about its truth. It is only when they have been exposed to the information for a longer period or have developed an interest in it that they experience skepticism.

2. Emotional Reactions: Unofficial news provokes emotional responses like curiosity, nervousness, and outrage related to one's interests in gender issues or social injustice.

3. Attitude Shift: Participants have noted changes in their attitudes towards trust issues because of their constant interaction with unofficial information, with increased skepticism against the unofficial media.

4. Critical Thinking Development: Participants have expressed that the inconsistency between formal and informal news has increased their critical awareness of the biased nature of information not been verified.

This analysis not only intends to synthesize results of scientific investigations, but it will also reveal the psychological mechanism underlying young female adults' engagement with alternative news media concerned with emotional arousal, heuristic-based trust, and identity.

In order to establish credibility, this work employs triangulation by cross-comparing the responses across participants with different education levels and media-viewing practices with utmost caution. Moreover, interviews were also done with utmost consideration given to reflective notes with the purpose of reducing participant bias. Despite the small sample, the qualitative

framework permits abundant information regarding the actual experience of the young female adult as they navigate China's highly saturated and emotion-rich media environment.

4. Results

The interviews of a pool that consisted of a total of six Chinese young female adult subjects between 18 and 25 years old and determined that their perception and emotional reaction to unofficial news overwhelmingly function within four dimensions, that is, skepticism and trust, emotional reactions, attitude change, and critical and reflective thinking.

There existed a two-fold feeling of mistrust among all the respondents toward unofficial news media. They agreed that unofficial news is neither well substantiated, but they had more dependence on its recency, salience, and perceived legitimacy. A participating undergraduate reflected, "Official news sounds too abstract and official; I like hearing that via friends on social media—it is closer to reality and more entertaining." In contrast with official news media, many participants relied more on posts posted by their friends on Douyin or Xiaohongshu, though they are also aware that such information is possibly biased or doctored.

Interviewees reported that they have intensive emotional responses to unofficial news, including curiosity, worry, or outrage at morality. Social events or gender issues that are closer to individuals' interests have higher chances to have emotional appeal, e.g., sympathy and anger. A graduate student respondent explained that unofficial news "spreads faster and is more emotionally resonant," while official reports "come later and seem sanitized."

Several participants reported that their views were at times changed by exposure to unauthorized news. Even after noticing errors, they maintained their exposure to such information. For example, a respondent admitted to following interesting stories even if they were proven wrong afterwards.

It is noteworthy that, in response to mismatches between unofficial and official information, a few respondents indicated increased emotionality while others became more verificatory and skeptical. Two respondents indicated that they now "refer and compare a few sources or read comments prior to believing anything." This suggests that, even as unofficial information is problematic, maybe it can also promote media literacy and critical, reflective thinking ability amongst Chinese female adults.

Additionally, the findings shed light on an intricate psychological process whereby an appeal to emotion typically pays a price in terms of factual incorrectness; at the same time, though, it facilitates critical thinking and the ability for reflective reasoning [13].

5. Discussion

Chinese female adults are found to have a two-faced interaction with unofficial news media. In line with the elaboration likelihood model [9], information is processed by the respondents via peripheral routes that are defined by emotion-centered cues, perceived self-relevance, and a quest for approval amongst their peers, rather than systematic processing. This result is in line with Munusamy et al. 's result that diffusion of information and belief construction in social media are nearly fully grounded on affective engagement [4].

It is said that the coexistence of belief and skepticism means a wider crisis regarding media trust in present China [7,8]. The respondents' mistrust in main-stream media and their sentimental dependence on it highlight the contradictions between institutional power and social legitimacy. Official information is found to be abstract, stiff, and slow, while unofficial information is found to

be nearby and timely, fulfilling emotional and social requirements that mainstream media often neglect.

Affective responses, as well as above all curiosity, empathy, and worry, significantly shape perception and identification of informal information. They not only increase levels of response, but also induce attitude change even among respondents with previous information regarding errors. Misinformation persuasion effect is typically its appeal at affect level rather than information content [5].

Affective states, especially curiosity, concern, and empathy, are at the heart of perception growth and detection of informal information. They not only increase levels of response, but they also trigger attitude changes even among pre-information respondents with erroneous belief. Misinformation persuasion effect is more prevalent at the affective than at the informational content level [5].

The result overall is that unofficial information is both negative and positive for young adult women. Either emotional appeal can reinforce prejudices or reinforce enhanced intellectual processing. In response, increasing education about media literacy and invoking metacognitive thinking.

Among female young adult audiences, it is possible to mitigate adverse emotional effects while simultaneously developing critical perception within the evolving media landscape of China.

6. Conclusion

It investigates the effects that unofficial news transmitted through social media have on the thinking, emotion, attitudes, and behaviors of Chinese female adults with college education or higher, between 18 and 25 years old. By conducting six semi-structured interviews, the paper determined that unofficial news will often trigger great emotions while concurrently affecting their belief in and critical perception of the media.

The report says that the respondents switch back and forth between credulity and skepticism; they know the timeliness, relevancy, and emotional appeal that unofficial news providers have, even though they know that unofficial providers are uncertain. Emotion is appealed to instead of fact checking, and exposure to counter information facilitates critical thinking, a set of verifications prior to forming opinion.

Unofficial information is both a liability and a potential asset. Whereas perception can be skewed and emotion impulses maintained by it, unofficial information can also work to encourage critical and reflective thinking.

Future scholars can extend this work by employing bigger and more exhaustive samples and exploring gender variations in both cognitively and emotion-based responses. Furthermore, by integrating media education under the larger umbrella of the study of media at the university level, University students can enjoy a more balanced interplay between factual information and emotional engagement as younger female adults, especially against the background of China's ever-changing and intricate digital information environment.

Unofficial information has a great influence on perception in terms of authenticity, belief, and sentiment among Chinese young adults. The above statement is contrary to common assumptions that information via media is credible; nevertheless, it is highly potential to cultivate psychological resilience and critical thinking for big data.

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