Social Media Misinformation And Public Trust In Government: A Comparative Analysis Of China And Malaysia

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Abstract

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design, analysing secondary data from recent academic literature (2018-2026). Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory, the analysis focuses on three key dimensions of misinformation which include misinformation virality, perceived credibility, and social media usage frequency. The findings show that misinformation does not reduce public trust, instead it operates as a conditional influence shaped by political alignment, prior beliefs, and levels of media literacy. Viral spread can increase the exposure of information, while the perceived credibility of information determines whether false information will be accepted. However, social media usage argues that both informed engagement and susceptibility to misleading content. This study contributes to the literature by integrating multiple dimensions of misinformation within a comparative framework and suggesting practical implications to strengthening public trust in government.

Keywords*: Social Media Misinformation, Public Trust in Government, Misinformation Virality, Perceived Credibility, Social Media Usage*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The development of digital media has substantially changed the way political communication takes place. Traditional forms of communication, such as newspapers, radio and television, have increasingly been complemented by digital platforms, including social media accessed through computers and mobile devices. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Douyin and Xiaohongshu have become important spaces for accessing, sharing and discussing political information (Li et al., 2025; Grantham et al., 2025). These platforms allow citizens to obtain information more quickly and participate in public discussions with fewer traditional communication barriers.

However, the rapid development of social media has also created concerns about the quality and reliability of information available online. Some studies suggest that platform features and recommendation systems may favour content that generates high levels of engagement, including sensational or emotionally appealing information (Ceylan & Wood, 2026). Consequently, inaccurate or misleading information may circulate widely before users have an opportunity to verify its accuracy. The increasing use of artificial intelligence in content creation may further complicate the identification of misleading information.

The relationship between social media misinformation and public trust is particularly important in political communication. Social media users may interpret political information according to their existing beliefs, political preferences and perceptions of information sources. Klein and Robison (2019), for example, found that social media use may be associated with political polarisation and differences in trust in government. Therefore, understanding misinformation requires attention not only to whether information is false, but also to how widely it circulates, whether users perceive it as credible, and how frequently users encounter information through social media.

The issue is also relevant to China and Malaysia because the two countries operate within different political, media and regulatory environments. Examining the two contexts comparatively provides an opportunity to consider how differences in information environments may shape the relationship between misinformation and public trust.

1.2 Problem Statement

The increasing circulation of misinformation on social media presents a challenge for political communication and public trust. Social media platforms are designed to facilitate rapid information sharing and user engagement. As a result, information that attracts strong reactions may receive substantial attention, regardless of whether it is accurate. The rapid circulation of misleading information can therefore make it more difficult for users to distinguish between reliable and unreliable political information.

Existing responses to misinformation include fact-checking, content moderation, official corrections and regulatory measures. However, previous research indicates that these approaches have limitations. For example, Nyhan (2021) argues that the effects of fact-checking may not always persist over time or reach all groups of users equally. Research on China has also examined measures such as official refutation, platform-based fact-checking, censorship and endorsement by official media, while identifying limitations associated with these approaches (Lu et al., 2020). In Malaysia, government communication through official briefings, dedicated websites and multiple communication channels has also been used to address misinformation, although issues relating to consistency, transparency and political communication remain relevant (Masngut & Mohamad, 2021).

Another limitation in the existing literature is that misinformation is often examined as a broad phenomenon rather than through its different dimensions. Previous studies have examined issues such as misinformation exposure, virality, credibility and social media use, but these dimensions are not always considered together (Tandoc et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). This creates a need for a more integrated examination of how different characteristics of misinformation may be associated with public trust in government.

Furthermore, much of the existing research focuses on individual countries or specific aspects of misinformation. This limit understanding of how different media systems, regulatory environments and patterns of social media use may shape the relationship between misinformation and public trust. A comparison between China and Malaysia is therefore useful because the two countries provide different political and media contexts in which citizens encounter and interpret information.

Accordingly, this study examines three dimensions of social media misinformation: misinformation virality, perceived credibility and social media usage frequency. It compares the evidence relating to China and Malaysia to develop a contextual understanding of how these dimensions may be associated with public trust in government.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study wants to fill the research gap above. It has three main objectives:
RO1: To analyse how the virality of misinformation affects public trust in the government.
RO2: To evaluate how perceived credibility of information influences public trust in government.
RO3: To assess how social media usage frequency shapes public trust in government.

1.4 Research Question

This study uses the research objectives to make three research questions:
RQ1: How does the virality of misinformation affect public trust in government?
RQ2: How does perceived credibility of information influence public trust in government?
RQ3: How does social media usage frequency shape public trust in government?

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.5.1 Academic Value

This study provides a new perspective on the field of political communication. Many previous studies on misinformation are broad and simple. This research concentrates on the mechanism of how misinformation spreads and how people react to it. After examining three key indicators separately, the study refines and expands the theory of communication effect in the digital age. In addition, former studies about misinformation in social media communication and its effect on public trust often focus on single countries research. There is a noticeable gap in comparative research, especially across two different political systems. This research addresses the gap by comparing different strategies and the decline of public trust in China and Malaysia.

1.5.2 Practical Implications

The results of this study provide guidance for people facing misinformation and the decline in public trust. The government can use these findings to formulate laws, regulations and policies related to these issues in a targeted way. Besides, the government can be more transparent to the public regarding citizen's interests in the future. In this way, people will trust the government and public institutions more. Also, media platforms should teach the public more media literacy to enhance the ability to distinguish wrong information.

1.5.3 Societal Impact

The study helps shape a more credible cyberspace and reduce information division for citizens. It clearly shows how misinformation affects public trust. The public will understand the importance of judging online information, and will be more careful. Besides, once people have the capacity to think and judge independently about online information, they can also strengthen political stability and improve their civic awareness to some extent. More importantly, the findings of this study will not reduce people's freedom of speech, but will encourage people to evaluate and participate in political communication with a more thoughtful attitude.

1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on social media misinformation and its relationship with public trust in government, with particular attention to China and Malaysia. The study examines three dimensions: misinformation virality, perceived credibility and social media usage frequency.

The study primarily draws on recent academic literature, particularly studies published between 2018 and 2026. Earlier theoretical works are retained where they provide the foundations for Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory. The study focuses on social media rather than traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers. It also focuses on public trust in government rather than trust in non-governmental organisations or private companies.

The study uses secondary sources and does not collect primary data through surveys, interviews or experiments. Therefore, the findings represent a synthesis and interpretation of existing research rather than a direct empirical test of causal relationships.

2.0 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative literature review using thematic synthesis. This design is appropriate because the study aims to integrate existing research on social media misinformation, political communication and public trust rather than collect new primary data.

The study does not attempt to statistically test causal relationships. Instead, it identifies recurring findings, areas of agreement and disagreement, and contextual differences across the existing literature.

The comparative approach is used to examine how evidence from China and Malaysia may differ according to their respective media, political and regulatory environments.

The analysis is guided by Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993). These theories are used as analytical lenses rather than theories tested through primary empirical data.

2.2 Data Collection Method

Academic literature was searched through Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The search focused primarily on studies concerning social media misinformation, public trust in government, political communication, misinformation virality, media credibility and social media usage.
The literature search was conducted during 2018 - 2026.
The main search combinations included:
(i) "social media" AND misinformation AND "public trust in government"
(ii) "social media misinformation" AND "political trust"
(iii) misinformation AND virality AND government trust
(iv) misinformation AND credibility AND political trust
(v) "social media usage" AND "public trust"
(vi) China AND misinformation AND political trust
(vii) Malaysia AND misinformation AND political trust

The search and screening process involved three stages. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify studies relevant to the research objectives. Second, potentially relevant studies were examined in full text. Third, the selected literature was organised according to the three dimensions of the study and the China–Malaysia comparative context.

2.3 Data Selection Criteria

There were some strict criteria for the final choice of the literature in order to keep methodological rigour and to guarantee the academic validity of the synthesis of the data.

2.3.1 Inclusion Criteria

The study included:
(i) Peer-reviewed journal articles and credible scholarly publications relevant to social media, misinformation, political communication or public trust.
(ii) Studies examining misinformation, political trust, information credibility or social media use.
(iii) Literature addressing at least one of the three dimensions identified in the research objectives.
(iv) Studies providing relevant evidence or contextual insights concerning China or Malaysia.
(v) Foundational theoretical publications, where necessary, to explain Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory.
(vi) Selected government, institutional or platform publications only when they were required to provide contextual information for the recommendations.

2.3.2 Exclusion Criteria

The study excluded:
(i) Opinion blogs and unverified online sources.
(ii) Sources without sufficient relevance to misinformation, social media or public trust.
(iii) Duplicate publications.
(iv) Studies that focused entirely on unrelated media effects.
(v) Literature that did not provide a meaningful theoretical, empirical or contextual contribution to the research questions.

2.4 Data Analysis Method

The selected secondary data are studied in this study using a Qualitative Literature Review plus Thematic Synthesis. This is not the usual way of doing an empirical thematic analysis because in this case we are not coding primary data, e.g. a set of interview transcripts. Instead, we are dealing with a narrative thematic analysis and of the conceptual integration in a corpus of existing studies. The analysis was done by reading with a critical look the selected literature in order to find out if there were some patterns or if there were some theoretical overlapping or what were the divergent arguments about the effect of misinformation in the public trust.

The extracted insights were then gathered and grouped into three main thematic dimensions that relate to the research questions, namely: the virality of the misinformation, the perceived credibility of the information, and the use of social media. With this comparative thematic interpretation, the study goes beyond the description of the singular extracts. It is the system that describes the relations between these variables, since it is the one that looks at how these variables together affect the public trust, and how the effect is mediated by the different political and regulatory contexts, in this case the context of China and Malaysia.

2.5 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the literature search focused mainly on English-language academic publications. This may create publication and language bias because relevant studies published in Chinese or Malay may not have been included.

Second, comparing China and Malaysia involves two different political, media and regulatory environments. Therefore, findings from the two contexts cannot necessarily be assumed to be directly equivalent.

Third, the study relies on secondary literature. The quality of the findings therefore depends partly on the methods and interpretations of the original studies. Since no primary survey, interview or experiment was conducted, the present study cannot directly establish causal relationships between misinformation and public trust.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

The current literature based on the existing works aimed at making informed deductions regarding the impact of social media about the presence of social media misinformation and public trust in government. It aims at listing the key interpretations of the problem, the application of theory into understanding the research problem, theory and the empirical literature on the impact of misinformation, credibility, sharing and consumption of different social media, in government. The review is in 4 sections; conceptual definitions, theoretical framework, empirical review, and research gap. Since the literature on misinformation, political trust among others is still abundant, yet there seems to be a rather uneven distribution of research, with most studies concentrating on only one variable (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

The existing literature provides insights into social media misinformation and its influence on public trust in government. Several scholars have examined this issue from different perspectives. Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) conceptualise misinformation as a multidimensional phenomenon, highlighting the complex of defining "fake news." Vosoughi et al. (2018) argue that fraudulent content tends to be spread faster and wider as compared with factual information.

In terms of political trust, Klein and Robison (2019) find that social media usage can polarise public trust in government. According to Ognyanova et al. (2020), the effect of misinformation on trust differs between individuals depending on political alignment; however, Boulianne and Humprecht (2023) shows that the relationship between misinformation exposure and government trust varies between countries.

Gong et al. (2022), the mediating effect of perceived credibility on political trust has a major impact on the overall credibility of a source. In addition, Arshad and Khurram (2020) indicate that the level of credibility associated with government communications can affect citizens' willingness to engage in political activities and how much they trust their government. Conversely, McLoughlin and Brady (2024) cite algorithmic amplification as a contributing factor in increasing the spread of emotionally driven misinformation.

Theoretical contributions are also significant. McCombs and Shaw (1972) describe how the mass media shape public perception and Robert Entman (1993) describes the manner in which the way in which the information is presented affects the way people understand the message. More recently, Udry and Barber (2024) have demonstrated that repeated exposure leads to increased belief in false information and increases its impact on public opinion.

3.2 Conceptual Definitions

3.2.1 Social Media Misinformation

The term “social media misinformation” describes incorrect or partly correct information that is posted on the internet with or without the objective of misleading the audience. In a political communication environment, such misinformation spoils the comprehension of issues, creates doubts, results in varied appreciation of the political performers and other such actors (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Furthermore, misinformation was different from disinformation as argued by Aïmeure et al (2023). To explain further, misinformation is false or inaccurate information that is shared without the intent to defraud; however, disinformation is fraudulent information that was intentionally spread and shared with the purpose to mislead, manipulate or deceive other people (Aïmeure et al., 2023).

3.2.2 Public Trust in Government

Hardin (1998) public trust in government refers to the citizens’s level of confidence towards government institutions, public policy, and government decisions. This reflects to which citizens believe the government acts transparently, fairly, and prioritizes the interests of society. Public trust is one of the important elements to make sure political stability, policy compliance, and effective governance.

Besides, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) argues that trust in government is influenced by citizens’ perceptions of government reliability, integrity, responsiveness, and accountability.

3.3.3 Key Dimension of Misinformation

(a) Exposure to Social Media Misinformation

Empirical study argues that exposure to social media misinformation refers to individuals receiving false, misleading, or unverified information while through social media platforms. Users may be exposed to content intentionally or unintentionally via news feeds, reposts, online discussions, or viral content from other users. Repeated exposure to this content can lead users to believe or spread inaccurate information even further, which then has the potential to affect their perceptions, attitudes, decision making, and institutions' public trust (Aïmeur at al, 2023).

(b) Belief in Social Media Misinformation

Belief in social media misinformation refers to users accepting false or misleading information but treating it as accurate or trustworthy. This is because users who do not have media literacy or fact-checking behaviour are more likely to believe misinformation. This belief can influence attitudes, perceptions and reduce trust towards government institutions thus further affecting public opinion, social behaviour and confidence in official information sources (Anspach & Carlson, 2020).

(c) Virality of Misinformation

In the study of Vosoughi et al. (2018) viral misinformation can be defined as the rapid spread of incorrect or false information via social networking sites, especially through the use of features such as reposting, sharing, likes, comments and through algorithmic-driven content promotion, which allows for the rapid dispersal of incorrect and inaccurate sources of information as opposed to reliable and verified news sources. The speed and broad reach of viral misinformation can significantly influence public opinion, social behaviour, political decision, and trust toward government authorities.

(d) Social Media Usage Frequency

Frequency of usage refers to how often people use and interact with social networking sites in a given time frame. The more frequently a person uses the site, the greater the chance they will encounter different types of online content including false information. Repeatedly using social media can also affect users' perceptions, attitudes, and trust in public institutions, since repeated presentations of factual and unfactual information affect their understanding of events, determine what's credible, and influence how individuals evaluate the government's actions with regard to social issues (Shu et al., 2017).

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This research is based on two important communication theories: Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory. This research focuses on how social media misinformation affects a person's level of trust in government. These theories are relevant because there is a common assumption that misinformation on digital platforms does not just increase the salience of political issues but also affects how political events play out and how citizens judge the government.

Agenda-Setting Theory was first put forward by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who argued that the media does not necessarily shape people's thoughts, but it affects what people consider (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory offers the perspective that there is an increase in individuals' perception of a certain issue due to the extent of exposure to mass media that covers it. Looking at falsehoods in social networks, it can be applied to the phenomenon of widespread diffusion of such information, directing people's focus into politics and connecting them with, for example, corruption, the suffering of people due to the incompetence of the authority in execution, economic crisis or political affairs. Misinformation on such subjects, relevant or not, is usually propagated around the media for however long and users may start to imagine those problems are present urges even when the accuracy of the facts presented does not call for such a level of attention.

With the proliferation of digital media, the theory of Agenda-Setting has grown in importance as social media operates on algorithms that heavily promote 'sticky' content. Research suggests that in the online space, the more extreme or emotional the content, the more attention it gets (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Thus, it is easy for misinformation to sway and set the agenda above credible information for some time. This viral spread of fake news therefore may lead the public to predispose towards the thinking that political failures and misconduct appear widespread and normal which in turn increases the level of disaffection towards political institutions.

The research additionally incorporates Framing Theory that was elaborated by Robert Entman. As noted by researchers, Framing Theory explores the way in which information is put across to the public in such a manner that it explains and politically orients the public's internalization of the issues (Entman, 1993). Thus, media framing affects the way people identify what the problem is in society, who is to blame, what is the effect of it and what is the opinion of the people about political leaders. Particularly in the case of fake news, framing is used because fake, manipulative data is mostly employed for affective reactions as well as strengthening of political views.

For instance, government misinformation may portray governments as cheats, inefficient, corrupt, or bureaucratic. In other cases, even if the claims lack accuracy and essentials, exposure to such frames tends to affect dependence on political progress and legitimacy of knowledge of any institution in question. These framing effects increase when misinformation conforms to users' expectations, their ideological thinking, or possible resentment towards political elites. Thus, misinformation isn't only

concerned with the dispensing of factual inaccuracies; it also influences how people mentally structure politics or government services.

In this analysis, the engagement of both Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory completes an analytical framework. Agenda-setting accounts for the role and priorities of misleading information in increasing the certain aspects of the political issues and agenda setting does not the functions of the media. Full Analysis of the reasons why misinformation might erode public trust of social media even with people knowing that some of the content that is posted might not be entirely accurate is given. The theories further meet the notion that the effects of misinformation are not unidirectional but are contingent upon several variables such as media consumption, perceived credibility sources, political influence and existing information environment among others.

Besides, it becomes even more interesting to apply these theories in relation to China and Malaysia as the media politics of both countries differ. In the case of China, there is tight control of digital communication under the aegis of the state which could explain the differences in emphasis and presentation of political information as compared to the relatively liberal media of Malaysia. Thus, the theory developed for this research allows studying the impact of structural determinants, including those of the media, on the relation of fake information and trust in authority.

3.5 Empirical Review

3.5.1 Misinformation Virality and Public Trust in Government

The literature consistently indicates that false information can be easily propagated in the online environment. Vosoughi et al. (2018) revealed that compared to true news false news spread further faster and wider on Twitter. Recent studies however add that this may be enhanced due to an interplay of nudging mechanisms among individuals and elements of the platforms such that they escalate engagement when the contents they present provoke strong emotions or moral sentiments. This was supported by (McLoughlin & Brady, 2024). Another survey conducted by Vellani et al. (2023) reiterated that the level of how repetition helps propagate misinformation increases because the more people hear the misinformation, the more they believe it is true. These results are consequential for public confidence because highly viral misinformation makes anti-government rhetoric appear as widespread, socially acceptable, and hard to resist. Nevertheless, there are existing scholars who also contest whether virality alone tarnishes trust or whether the effects are mediated by political parties, source relevance and prior levels of trust.

3.5.2 Perceived Credibility and Public Trust in Government

The concept of perceived credibility should be seen as an element of trust that acts upon information exposure situations. As noted by Gong et al. (2022), the use of media credibility was found to be a significant intervening variable between the media usage and the political trust of young Chinese adults. Stated in simpler terms, the association between media utilization interchangeably the trust determined by the respective media content is believable by the users or not. There are studies that suggest the existence of certain factors that might enhance citizens' level of trust and the degree of their clientelism when government social media messages are constructed as relevant and trustworthy (Arshad & Khurram, 2020).

3.5.3 Social Media Usage Frequency and Public Trust in Government

Research studies on the frequency in usage report different findings as well. High social media usage assists with alert and access to political information encouraging civic engagement which can enhance trust in institutions in optimistic communication situations (Warren et al., 2014). On the other hand, individuals may be subjected to confusion with heavy usage because of conflicting messages, emotional rumours and misinformation galore particularly in emergency situations. Consequently, the frequency of use should not automatically be regarded as useless or detrimental. Instead, its effect relies on the context in which users consume information tasks.

3.6 Research Gap

There are three main gaps identified in the existing literature. Of these, one can observe that even though there have been numerous studies that have attempted to understand the level of trust in a society by assessing factors such as misinformation exposure, virality, credibility, and media use, very few have been successful in combining all these other factors into one framework. Secondly, the results are fragmentary and in bringing together the results the findings are conflicting with each other, for instance, all theories do not agree on how exposure engendered trust and whether that resulted in distrust or not without considering ideologies, the credibility of the source or the political circumstances. Finally, it is also important to provide political communication research synthesis that is contextual and up to date in regard to how public trust in the government is affected by all the above factors combined.

Another key gap in the existing literature is too much focus on the influence of different digital governance systems in controlling the effects of misinformation. Studies that tackle misinformation tend to focus on a particular country, which limits the understanding of how, for instance, how the governance systems, media control, and even platforms, affect the trust of the people. An analysis based on China and Malaysia is, consequently, a useful compass in understanding how different political communication systems would shape people's susceptibility to misinformation and their trust in government institutions.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction to Findings and Analysis

This section presents the findings of a qualitative thematic analysis based on existing literature. As designed, the analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and focuses on different aspects of social media misinformation, specifically how these factors influence public trust in the government.

In order to improve the clarity and relevance of the analysis, this study divides misinformation into three core dimensions: virus transmission, perceived credibility and frequency of social media use. These dimensions coincide with the research objectives and reflect the complex characteristics of misinformation in contemporary political communication (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

This section also introduces a comparative perspective and analyses relevant evidence from China and Malaysia. In this way, we can better understand how differences in media systems, regulatory frameworks and information environments affect the relationship between misinformation and public trust.

This section not only summarizes the existing research but also integrates and evaluates the key findings of the existing literature. In the process of analysis, the consensus views between different studies are sorted out, and the differences are also discussed. In this way, it becomes clearer which specific conditions will make misinformation more likely to weaken public trust in the government.

4.2 Influence of Misinformation Virality on Public Trust in Government

Perceived credibility appears to be an important condition in determining how users respond to political information. Although viral content may increase exposure, users still evaluate whether information appears reliable.

Gong et al. (2022) specifically examined young adults in China and found that media credibility was an important intervening factor between media use and political trust. This finding indicates that the relationship between media exposure and political trust may depend partly on how users evaluate the credibility of the information they encounter.

Credibility is also relevant to government communication. Arshad and Khurram (2020) suggest that government communication perceived as relevant and trustworthy can be associated with greater political engagement and trust. Similarly, clear and accurate communication during periods of uncertainty may support confidence in public institutions (Zhai et al., 2022).

Framing Theory helps explain why credibility may matter. Users may be more likely to accept a particular interpretation when information comes from a source, they consider reliable or when the information is consistent with their existing understanding of political events.

The comparison between China and Malaysia suggests that users may encounter different credibility structures. In China, official and state-linked communication channels play an important role in the digital information environment. In Malaysia, citizens have access to a more diverse range of media and political information sources. These differences may result in different processes through which users access information credibility.

Nevertheless, credibility should not be equated with factual accuracy. Information may be perceived as credible even when it is inaccurate. Therefore, improving public trust requires not only increasing the availability of information but also improving transparency, verification and users' ability to distinguish reliable information from misleading claims.

4.3 Influence of Perceived Credibility on Public Trust in Government

Perceptual credibility plays a central role in whether false information will affect public trust in the government. Although viral transmission increases the visibility of information, whether the public accepts it often depends on its credibility. Individuals will not receive information passively. Before forming political opinions and evaluations, they usually judge whether a content is reliable.

Research in the United Arab Emirates points out that media credibility is an important factor in connecting information and political trust. When people think that certain information is credible, even if it lacks factual basis, they may incorporate it into their understanding of political reality (Gong et al., 2022). This means that once false information is presented in an authoritative or persuasive way, it is more likely to have an impact on public trust.

At the same time, credibility can also enhance public trust in the government. Some studies have found that if official channels can remain transparent and respond to public questions in a timely manner, the public's confidence and willingness to participate in politics will be enhanced (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). Similarly, in a period of high social uncertainty, clear and accurate information can reduce public anxiety and strengthen their trust in institutions (Zhai et al., 2022)

Theoretically, the framework construction process further illustrates how credibility shapes public perception. Information that is consistent with the individual's existing ideas, or information published by credible sources, is more likely to be accepted by the public. This will also affect their understanding of government behaviour and governance performance (Entman, 1993). In this process, credibility not only determines whether the information will be received, but also affects how the public interprets the relevant content.

The impact of perceived credibility will also vary from country to country. In China, public trust is usually closely linked to official media and national communication channels, so government-approved information is often more likely to be regarded as credible. In contrast, Malaysia's media environment is more diverse, and the public can access different types of information sources, which makes people's judgments on the credibility of information more diverse, and sometimes there are contradictions.

4.4 Influence of Social Media Usage Frequency on Public Trust in Government

The frequency of social media use will affect the public's trust in the government, but this impact is more complex and also affected by the specific environment. As the frequency of use increases, the opportunity for individuals to access political information will also increase, which will help to improve the public's awareness, participation and discussion of public affairs. Under the condition that the information is true and reliable, more frequent use of social media may enhance public trust in government agencies by promoting citizen participation (Warren et al., 2014).

However, frequent use of social media will also expose users to more false information, contradictory narratives and emotional content. In this environment, users may face the problem of information overload, and it is more difficult to distinguish between reliable content and misleading information. When people are constantly exposed to different interpretations of the same political event, they may have more doubts, which in turn reduces confidence in the reliability of government agencies.

The impact of social media use is not exactly the same. Different users have differences in media literacy, critical thinking ability and existing beliefs, which will affect how they understand and judge the information they come into contact with. People with high media literacy are usually more inclined

to actively analyse information content, while some users are more likely to be affected by false information and further change their trust in the government (van Zoonen et al., 2024).

This difference is also reflected in the context of different countries. In Malaysia, the more open and diverse media environment allows the public to access more different views, which not only increases the opportunity for public participation, but also increases the possibility of exposure to false information. In contrast, China's highly regulated digital media environment will reduce the public's access to conflicting information, which reduces information uncertainty to a certain extent and limits the scope of views that the public can access.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

Research results show that the impact of social media false information on public government trust is not consistent, but is affected by many conditions. The viral spread of false information increases the exposure of misleading content, and the public's judgment of the credibility of the information determines whether the content will be accepted. At the same time, the frequency of social media use also shapes the information environment in which these processes occur.

These factors will interact and affect how the public understands and interprets political messages. Their impact will also vary with the specific environmental changes. The differences in the media system and regulatory environment between China and Malaysia affect the way of information dissemination and further affect the public's trust in the government.

On the whole, false information cannot be simply regarded as a direct reason for the decline in public trust. Its impact is often closely related to information credibility, information contact mode and information environment.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, social media misinformation would affect public trust in government. To address these problems requires an effective strategy with a multi-stakeholder approach which involves governments, social media platforms and the citizens. Ultimately, effective strategies should not solely focus on spreading misinformation but also strengthening credibility and improving the information environment. The following recommended recommendations provide practical and policy relevant solutions based on the key dimensions that identified in this study.

5.1 Strengthening Government Communication

The government may introduce relevant legislative frameworks and regulatory mechanisms to increase accountability. By implementing these frameworks, it addresses repeated exposure to misinformation by ensuring that platforms take responsibility for the content distributed through their systems. Besides, early identification of misinformation through the monitoring systems helps to intervene before the widespread of misinformation. For example, the UK’s Online Safety Act 2024 explains how a government can monitor, assess, and mitigate the spread of false information on social media (House of Commons, 2025).

The role of the government to combat misinformation as well as build trust in their citizens is very important in the ever-evolving digital world. Governments can achieve this by enhancing and holding social media platforms accountable using legislative and regulatory systems. Such systems will enable governments to limit the negative impact of being exposed to the same piece of misinformation many times, by obligating that social media platforms are responsible for the misinformation published through their platform. Media monitoring systems can aid in the early detection of misinformation and help to intervene before it is too widely disseminated. An example of a government monitoring the proliferation of misinformation via social media can be seen in the UK Online Safety Act of 2024 (House of Commons, 2025).

Additionally, in Malaysia the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's take the role in regulating the communications and multimedia platforms with the powers provided by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act (1998) and the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998). The introduction of Application Service Provider Class (ASP(C)) licence from

MCMC clarifies that social platforms should take their responsibility on actively moderate misleading information and comply with Malaysia regulations. Through ASP(C), MCMC has removed over 130,000 pieces of fraudulent content (Idris, 2025). This highlights that regulation can be a tool to promote positive platform behaviour and lower down the amount of misinformation on social media platforms.

Instead of regulatory measures, governments may also actively use official social media channels. Active use and ongoing frequent postings on these accounts allow direct communication between governments and citizens, as governments can keep the public up-to-date and correct fraudulent content.

5.2 Mitigating Virality-Driven Misinformation

The study argues that virality is one of the easiest ways to increase the spread of misinformation. Sessa and Miguel (2025) said that highly engaging and emotionally content tends to spread more rapidly as compared with factual information. To mitigate viral-driven misinformation it requires both regulatory intervention as well as algorithmic systems.

Social media platforms should implement relevant mechanisms in order to reduce algorithmic amplification of unverified or misleading information. Algorithms designed primarily for user interaction often favour sensationalist and controversial content, which is usually inaccurate. Regulatory intervention such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) demonstrates how governments can mandate social media platforms to enhance transparency in their algorithmic systems and take responsibility for content dissemination (European Commission, 2022).

Besides, Germany has implemented a testing ground for algorithmic accountability, with several landmark legal actions taken against major technology companies which include X, TikTok, Amazon, and Meta. These cases illustrate how algorithmic systems can be scrutinised and regulated to prevent the excessive spread of harmful content. Under guidance by regulatory frameworks such as the DSA, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the AI Act, help to ensure platforms adopt more responsible content management practices (Sessa & Miguel, 2025).

5.3 Enhancing Information Credibility

Improving the credibility of information helps to rebuild public trust. In order to improve credibility information, governments and social media platforms may collaborate with fact-checking programmes to verify information. For example, the collaboration of Meta and third-party fact-checking programmes have identified and reduced by 8 percent of misinformation (Meta, 2025).

In Malaysia, the development of Sebenarnya.my portal by MCMC helps the public in reducing misinformation. For example, the portal collaborates and partners with social media platforms and Artificial Intelligence Fact-check Assistant (AIFA) to verify information and make sure accurate information is being shared (MCMC, 2023). Yuan et al. (2023) further prove that the collaboration and partnership between centralized and reliable platforms may reduce spread of misinformation and enhance public trust towards government communication channels.

Fact-checking labels, verification badges and credibility indicators are useful resources for users to distinguish between true and false information. By implementing these tools may decrease the number of misinformation, as well as promote users' responsibility while sharing information. The more credibility of shared information can result in a more informed society and enhance the public confidence in governmental institutions.

5.4 Managing Social Media Usage and Information Overload

Social media platforms might introduce features like content review tools to encourage users verifying information before they share and take responsibility on information that is being shared. For example, TikTok has implemented user awareness features which to alert users on potentially misleading content (TikTok, 2024). These measures help to increase user awareness and reduce impulsive sharing behaviour.

Moreover, to ensure citizens can access accurate and latest information the governments may improve the accessibility of official information. Other than that, the governments may optimize

communication channels, improve search visibility, and actively engage within multiple social media platforms to reach different groups of audiences. Improving the accessibility of reliable information will help reduce the negative impact brought by fraudulent content and shaping a healthier social media environment.

Enhancing critical thinking skills and media literacy is one of the ways to minimise the spread of misinformation. Nevertheless, education organizations may also equip individuals with the skills of verifying information and identifying fraudulent information. The development of these skills can help individuals to navigate complex information environments and mitigate the issue of misinformation on public trust.

6.0 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between social media misinformation and public trust in government through a qualitative comparative literature review of China and Malaysia. The analysis focused on three dimensions: misinformation virality, perceived credibility and social media usage frequency.

The literature suggests that misinformation does not automatically produce lower public trust. Instead, its relationship with trust is conditional on how widely information circulates, whether users perceive it as credible, how frequently they encounter social media content, and the broader information environment in which communication takes place.

Misinformation virality can increase the visibility and salience of political narratives, particularly when content receives repeated exposure. Perceived credibility is important because users may evaluate information according to the reliability of its source and its consistency with existing beliefs. Social media usage frequency can increase access to political information and opportunities for civic engagement, but frequent exposure may also increase the risk of information overload and encounters with conflicting or misleading narratives.

The comparative analysis further indicates that these dimensions operate within different media and regulatory environments. China's more regulated digital information environment may shape the circulation and visibility of politically sensitive information, while Malaysia's more diverse media environment provides access to a wider range of political viewpoints and information sources. These differences should not be interpreted as producing a predetermined level of public trust. Rather, they demonstrate the importance of considering national context when examining misinformation and political trust.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates the usefulness of combining Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory as analytical lenses. Agenda-Setting Theory helps explain how highly visible and repeated misinformation may increase the salience of political issues, while Framing Theory helps explain how the presentation of information may shape its interpretation. Together, these perspectives provide a way to understand why the relationship between misinformation and public trust may vary according to information exposure and context.

Practically, the findings suggest that responses to misinformation should involve more than content removal. Governments may strengthen transparent communication and access to reliable information, social media platforms may improve algorithmic accountability and user-facing verification measures, and educational institutions may strengthen media literacy. These approaches are particularly relevant because virality, credibility and usage frequency operate together rather than independently.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and its focus mainly on English-language sources. Future research could strengthen the evidence base through surveys, interviews or other primary empirical methods in China and Malaysia. Future studies could also examine specific social media platforms, demographic differences and the role of political beliefs in greater detail.

Overall, the contribution of this study lies not simply in showing that China and Malaysia have different information environments. Rather, it highlights that misinformation virality, perceived credibility and social media usage frequency operate within different media and regulatory contexts, which may shape how citizens encounter, interpret and respond to political information and government communication.

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