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Exploring the Factors Considered by College Students in Assessing the Credibility of Media Messages

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Abstract

Students are increasingly exposed to persuasive information that subtly shapes their decisions through trusted figures and authoritative messaging. This study explored the factors considered by college students in assessing the credibility of authority figures in media messages. This study utilized the qualitative description method to explore the experiences of ten college students from various programs at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Katipunan, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines during the School Year 2024–2025, all of whom were purposively selected based on specific criteria related to their exposure to social media. Data were gathered through open, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, conducted with strict adherence to ethical considerations. The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis. Verbatim responses, translated into English, were coded to

identify themes. Six key themes emerged: Admiration and trust in influencers, critical thinking and self-awareness, consistency and transparency, fact-checking and independent validation, disillusionment and exposure to bias, and experienced-based disappointment. Students demonstrate a growing skepticism and critical media awareness by cross-checking information, examining credibility, and identifying biases, particularly in political content. They also show disillusionment with influencer marketing, favoring independent research and objective reviews in their decision-making. These findings point to a developing critical understanding of persuasive media tactics, emphasizing the need for strengthened media literacy among students, educators, institutions, families, and media practitioners.

Keywords: Credibility, Critical Thinking, Fact-checking, Validation, Disillusionment, Bias, College Students, Social Media

Introduction

In today's media-saturated world, students are constantly exposed to various platforms, making it challenging to critically assess the credibility of information. In such an environment, individuals often rely on trusted authority figures—such as experts, celebrities, and influencers—to guide decision-making. While this reliance can simplify decision-making, it can also be risky when the authority lacks relevant expertise or has ulterior motives (Luttrell & Wallace, 2024). The influence of authority figures is especially pronounced in fields like health, politics, and consumer behavior, where endorsements can lead individuals to make decisions without fully evaluating the validity of the information (Ecker *et al.*, 2022) ^[9].

Studies show that people are more likely to accept claims from authority figures, even when their expertise is questionable (Budzynska & Reed, 2023; Battersby, 2021) ^[5, 4]. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) ^[17] suggests that individuals are especially susceptible to authority-based persuasion when they lack motivation or ability to engage critically with information. This is particularly concerning for students, who may not yet have fully developed critical thinking skills, making them more vulnerable to the influence of authority figures in media. Social media further complicates this dynamic by allowing almost anyone to present themselves as an authority, making it harder for students to distinguish reliable from unreliable sources (Freberg *et al.*, 2011).

Peer influence also plays a significant role in students' decision-making, with studies showing that students often rely on peer validation when interpreting media messages (Ajzen, 1991). Media literacy programs have been shown to improve students' ability to evaluate the credibility of sources and recognize persuasive techniques, helping them make more informed decisions (Mihailidis, 2014). This highlights the importance of equipping students with the skills necessary to critically engage with authority-based media messages, especially in an era where misinformation can spread quickly.

Much of the research has focused on broad media trends or consumer behavior, without addressing how students, particularly in regions like Western Mindanao, respond to messages across different media platforms. Cultural and economic factors in these areas may amplify students' reliance on authority figures, but these factors have not been fully explored. There is limited research on how these mechanisms manifest in specific cultural contexts, such as the challenges faced by students in Western Mindanao in accessing diverse media sources.

This study sought to fill these gaps by exploring how students in a public higher education institution like Jose Rizal Memorial State University in Zamboanga del Norte engage with media messages, considering how their contexts affect their reception of these messages. By examining the role of media literacy in empowering students to make more informed decisions, this research aims to provide insights into how education can help mitigate the influence of authority in media.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research method using steps in thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (as cited in Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)^[16], namely: (1) become familiar with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review themes; (5) define themes; (6) writing-up. The study was conducted at Jose Rizal Memorial State University (JRMSU) in Katipunan campus, Zamboanga del Norte, Philippines. Katipunan campus is one of JRMSU's satellite campuses and is strategically positioned in a community-oriented, rural setting. This is where the researcher observed the problem related to the influence of media messages on students' decision-making. Hence, this setting provided a unique perspective for examining how media influences young people's thinking and choices, particularly given that rural and urban students might have different levels of exposure to and attitudes toward authoritative media figures. Through the purposive sampling technique, the study involved 10 students, one from each of the 10 academic programs such as Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Engineering, Bachelor of Science in Forestry, Bachelor of Science in Agriculture, Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness Management, Bachelor of Secondary Education, Bachelor in Elementary Education, Bachelor of Science in Computer Science, Bachelor of Science in Hotel and Restaurant Management, Bachelor of Science in Information Management, and Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Technology, all offered at Jose Rizal Memorial State University (JRMSU). Data saturation was attained in this number of participants hence no additional participants were interviewed. This technique was particularly effective for this study as it allowed for the intentional selection of participants who possessed relevant experiences and insights regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This study used a semi-structured interview guide that served as the primary research instrument. The interview guide was designed to facilitate structured yet flexible interviews, allowing researchers to delve deeply into participants' experiences while ensuring that key topics relevant to the research question are consistently addressed. This instrument dealt with the main question: What specific factors do students consider when assessing the credibility of authority figures in media messages as part of their decision-making? To

validate the interview guide, the researcher first reread the questions to ensure they are clear, concise, and directly aligned with the study's objectives. The guide was then reviewed by the research experts, who provided feedback on its structure, clarity, and relevance to the research questions. The guide was also piloted tested among three students who were not part of the participants to evaluate the reliability of the questions. The semi-structured interview lasted 15 minutes, focusing on participants' experiences. Before the interview, participants signed an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, rights, confidentiality, and process.

Results and Discussions

Factors Considered by Students in Assessing the Credibility of Authority Figures in Media Messages

Admiration and Trust in Influencers

Emotional Connection: Students initially placed trust in influencers based on emotional connection, admiration, and likability, often leading to unquestioning acceptance of their endorsements. This reflected the development of parasocial relationships where followers feel a sense of closeness to influencers, thus associating their recommendations with credibility. Influencers were trusted because their personal appeal made them appear authentic and trustworthy, as exemplified by statements like "Since he recommended the product and I admired him, I was easily convinced." Participant 1 reflecting how thought-provoking content fosters respect and admiration. This admiration grows when influencers align their messages with values and causes that matter to the audience. Study supports the idea that influencers who evoke positive emotional impact—such as encouragement, hope, and validation—are more effective in building meaningful connections with their audience. Emotionally uplifting content fosters greater message receptivity and long-term engagement by activating positive affective states (Ki *et al.*, 2020)^[13]. Research emphasizes that when influencers address stigmatized or sensitive topics with empathy and support, they create a safe emotional space that promotes trust and loyalty. Furthermore study also found that perceived sincerity and emotional support from influencers significantly enhance followers' perceptions of authenticity and relational closeness. Thus, positive emotional impact not only draws attention but also solidifies an influencer's credibility and emotional resonance (Chang, 2023)^[6].

"She advocated for mental health... made me feel validated in seeking help," – P4

Similarly, P7's experience illustrate how positive emotional experiences, when tied to observable outcomes, reinforce belief in the influencer. Happiness derived from expected or observed success (such as in beauty or wellness content) can influence followers to feel more secure in their choices, attributing those results to the influencer's credibility. This shows that emotional impact, especially positive in nature, has the power to build both trust and admiration over time.

"I felt happy because I saw many positive results... their confidence was persuasive." – P7

Vulnerability to Bias: However, this admiration also created a credibility bias, where students prioritized the influencer's

personal likability over factual evidence. This led to a form of Argumentum ad Verecundiam (appeal to authority), where the influencer's popularity and personal traits were seen as sufficient proof of product reliability, even in the absence of substantiated claims or objective information. This bias highlights the danger of conflating trustworthiness with popularity.

Critical Thinking and Self-Awareness

Shift in Cognitive Behavior: Over time, students began to recognize the importance of critical thinking in assessing media messages, particularly those from influencers. Many students reported a shift from blind trust to more analytical approaches in which they started questioning the authenticity and motives behind messages (e.g., "I realized the importance of being critical and not easily believing..."). This represents a growing skepticism toward media figures, emphasizing the need to assess the validity of claims through more reflective and analytical lenses. This shows that influencers play a significant role in the cognitive process of their audience, swaying decisions through both subtle persuasion and perceived authority.

"Since he recommended the product and I admired him, I was easily convinced." - P5

Research consistently demonstrates that influencers can significantly shape audience thought and judgment, often bypassing critical evaluation due to perceived authority and emotional connection. According to study, processes of social influence, identification with a communicator can lead individuals to adopt opinions and behaviors without conscious scrutiny (Aldimi *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, it also argue that source credibility, particularly trust and expertise, plays a vital role in how individuals assess information online—often resulting in heuristic processing rather than critical thinking. Studies also show that influencer endorsements can subtly guide consumer decisions and belief systems, especially when emotional admiration overrides skepticism. Thus, influencers not only shape public perception but also become powerful agents in the cognitive decision-making process of their audiences (Belanche *et al.*, 2021).

However, the participants also expressed awareness of their evolving judgment. P2 indicate a turning point from blind acceptance to critical thinking. This awareness reflects a shift in cognitive behavior, as some participants began reassessing how media personalities influenced their judgments. Their responses suggest that influence is not absolute; over time, participants may become more reflective and self-aware, learning to question the persuasive messages they encounter, especially in politically charged or emotionally driven contexts.

"I realized the importance of being critical and not easily believing." - P2

Internal Dissonance and Reassessment: The development of cognitive dissonance (when conflicting information challenges previous beliefs) was also significant. For example, students who had initially trusted political figures or influencers began to re-evaluate their perceptions as they encountered contradictions. This conflict between initial trust and subsequent doubts prompted a more thoughtful and

deliberate approach to credibility assessment, with students becoming more aware of the complexity and manipulation that could be inherent in media messaging. P2 illustrated a cognitive dissonance where political preferences clashed with evolving perceptions of credibility. The shift in trust reveals an internal struggle between admiration and emerging doubts, especially when influencers or political figures begin to contradict the values or expectations of their followers.

"Initially, I admired both Duterte and Marcos, but... my trust shifted." - P2

When influencers or public figures behave in ways that contradict followers' expectations, this dissonance often triggers a reassessment of trust and belief systems. According to study, such internal conflict can lead to either attitude change or justification mechanisms to restore mental consistency (Taddicken & Wolff, 2020) ^[18]. Additionally, study emphasize that in politically charged contexts, dissonance may be intensified as audiences struggle to reconcile admiration with emerging doubts about credibility or alignment. These dynamics highlight how internal dissonance plays a critical role in the ongoing negotiation of trust and belief in the influencer-follower relationship (Huynh, 2022) ^[11].

P6 also expressed a reflective perspective signifying a conscious attempt to resolve internal tension by prioritizing national unity over partisan loyalty. This statement shows how some participants respond to internal dissonance by redefining their stance or values. Rather than continuing to be swayed by media-driven divisions, they choose a more principle-based approach, reflecting growth in their judgment and awareness of manipulative media influences.

"Instead of taking political sides, we should focus on being pro-Filipino." - P6

Study supports the idea that individuals can resolve internal dissonance through value reorientation and principled reasoning, particularly in response to media-induced conflict. According to study, cognitive dissonance can prompt reflective processing that leads to meaningful attitude change when individuals are motivated to achieve internal consistency (Hewety, 2023). Research highlights that media exposure can trigger both reactive and reflective responses, with more cognitively engaged individuals opting for value-based resolutions over emotional or partisan reactions. Furthermore, studies suggest that some media consumers actively resist polarization by critically evaluating content and reaffirming overarching principles such as national unity or social cohesion. This demonstrates a form of cognitive maturity, where audiences transcend media manipulation by aligning their beliefs with deeper, more stable values.

Consistency and Transparency

Authenticity and Responsiveness: The credibility of authority figures was increasingly tied to authenticity and responsiveness to audience feedback. Students appreciated influencers or figures who were transparent in their messaging and who engaged with their followers in a genuine way. The honesty in handling criticism and consistent communication were seen as crucial to

establishing trustworthiness (e.g., “He did not take [bashers'] comments seriously... not genuine”). When influencers failed to demonstrate authenticity, their credibility diminished.

P4 emphasized that reliability is visible through the alignment of words and behavior. For participants, authenticity is not just spoken but shown in how influencers act over time. Consistency, then, becomes a strong marker of trustworthiness. Without this, followers are more likely to doubt the intentions behind content, especially when public personas seem staged or inconsistent.

“She consistently matched her words with her actions... sincere in her messag.” - P4

Additionally, the demand for expert collaboration further emphasizes how participants measure credibility. P7 shows a clear preference for expert-backed content, especially when it involves health and well-being. This need for professional validation reflects the growing skepticism toward influencers who rely solely on charisma without factual support. Participants are evidently moving toward a more informed, cautious approach — one where credentials, accurate information, and sincerity serve as benchmarks for determining whom to believe and support.

“I thought it would be better if a doctor collaborated with the vlogger to endorse the product.” - P7

Research supports the notion that reliability in influencers is closely tied to consistent behavior, transparency, and demonstrated expertise (AlFarraj *et al.*, 2021)^[1]. According to study, authenticity—expressed through congruence between an influencer’s words and actions—plays a vital role in establishing credibility. Similarly, it also argues that followers assess reliability based on the influencer’s ability to maintain a coherent and transparent persona over time, which fosters sustained trust (Kapitan *et al.*, 2022)^[12]. When inconsistencies arise, audiences often perceive such behavior as inauthentic, leading to skepticism and disengagement. Thus, the literature reinforces that trust is not built on isolated statements but on a persistent pattern of reliable conduct (Balaban, & Szabolcs, 2022)^[2].

Avoidance of Partisanship: Participants also observed that partisanship or bias negatively impacted the credibility of political figures and media personalities. Those who were perceived as overly biased or aligned with specific political agendas were deemed less trustworthy. Neutrality and transparency were highly valued, especially in political discourse, as students sought more balanced and fact-based information.

Fact-Checking and Independent Validation

Proactive Research and Cross-Referencing: A significant trend among participants was the move toward self-driven investigation. Students emphasized the importance of independent validation of information, often using tools like Google to cross-reference product reviews or check certifications before making decisions. This reflects an increased reliance on fact-checking and research rather than accepting authority figures at face value (e.g., “I verify products through Google and check certifications”). This shift underscores the growing importance of independent validation in establishing credibility.

P10’s remark, reveals an awareness of influencer overreach and the dangers of conflating celebrity with expertise. This recognition underscores how media bias is not only about politics but also about unqualified endorsements in health and lifestyle spaces. P1 also noted that “showing a proactive effort to investigate the reputation and intent behind media figures before accepting their content as credible.

“AB is not a professional dermatologist.” - P10

“I check if they have a history of issues of scams or negative feedbacks.” - P1

Furthermore, P2’s strategy of reflects an evolved understanding that bias and agenda can distort truth. These responses collectively suggest that participants are not only identifying questionable motives but are also becoming more resistant to manipulation. The shift from blindly trusting influencers to scrutinizing their credibility highlights a deeper engagement with media literacy and a move towards independent evaluation.

“...cross-referencing info with multiple sources.” - P2

Research increasingly highlights the importance of audience awareness regarding the motives behind media content and the commercialization of influencer messaging (Aldimi *et al.*, 2025). According to study, influencers often operate at the intersection of personal branding and monetization, which can blur the lines between genuine advice and paid promotion. This commercial dynamic raises concerns about authenticity and the ethical implications of unqualified endorsements, particularly in sensitive domains like health and wellness (Christiansen, 2022)^[7]. Research emphasizes that as media consumers become more media literate, they start to critically assess not just the content but the intentions and qualifications of the content creators. It is also argued that proactive fact-checking and source evaluation are key indicators of engaged, skeptical audiences. Recognizing influencer overreach and questioning hidden agendas reflects a maturing public capable of navigating the complex motives shaping online narratives (Kim *et al.*, 2022)^[15].

Peer-Generated Content Over Endorsements: Rather than trusting celebrity or influencer endorsements, many participants started favoring crowdsourced reviews and peer-generated content. This shift indicates that real-world experiences and the perspectives of other consumers are viewed as more credible and reliable sources of information. The emphasis on independent voices over authority figures points to a preference for authentic experiences over commercialized or potentially manipulated endorsements.

Disillusionment and Exposure to Bias

Recognizing Bias and Commercial Motives: A growing sense of disillusionment emerged as students began recognizing that many influencers were motivated by commercial interests rather than genuine expertise. This realization led to a more critical engagement with media messages, as participants understood that endorsements could be financially driven and may not reflect true product quality (e.g., “honest YouTube reviews instead of influencers”). This shift in mindset reflects a deeper awareness of financial incentives shaping media content. P5 revealed this past experiences prompted them to look

beyond what is presented and dig deeper for truth. This shift demonstrates that while trust once rested on popularity or relatability, it now requires evidence, comparison, and independent validation.

"I searched for honest reviews from Youtube... Learned to research carefully..." - P5

Further emphasizing this theme, P7 underscored a proactive approach to information checking before purchase. P9 showed that the decision-making process has become more deliberate and grounded in fact-checking rather than emotional appeal. These responses reflect a broader trend of consumers becoming critical thinkers, not easily swayed by surface-level persuasion. Trust, therefore, has become a product of thorough investigation rather than blind admiration, reshaping the dynamics of consumer-influencer interactions.

"I verify products through Google and check certifications." - P7

"I now compare and research before trusting product endorsements." - P9

Recent literature supports the evolving nature of trust in consumer decision-making, especially in the context of influencer marketing. According to study, while influencer relatability and popularity initially drive consumer trust, long-term credibility is increasingly tied to transparency, consistency, and the perceived authenticity of endorsements (Vidani & Das, 2021). Consumers today are more discerning, engaging in practices such as product research, cross-platform reviews, and validation through third-party sources before making purchase decisions (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021)^[20]. This behavioral shift aligns with study findings, who note that digital consumers are becoming more skeptical of sponsored content, particularly when influencer motives appear driven by profit over genuine product experience. As demonstrated by participant reflections, trust is no longer passively granted but actively earned, reflecting a maturing digital marketplace where informed skepticism guides consumer behavior (Kim *et al.*, 2025)^[14].

Acknowledging Selective Reporting: Participants also noted instances of selective reporting, where key information was omitted or manipulated, leading them to further question the credibility of media sources. This was particularly evident in news media, where partiality or manipulative reporting prompted students to reconsider their trust in authority figures (e.g., "Some news was withheld..."). This exposure to bias, whether through influencer content or media, fostered a more cautious approach to accepting messages from authority figures.

P2 showed that political neutrality and transparency became key criteria in assessing credibility. This critical stance is further echoed in P8's observation, suggested that authenticity and responsiveness to criticism also factor into how people assess political messaging. These responses highlight a developing skepticism and demand for accountability from media figures.

"I didn't trust vloggers who were openly partisan." - P2

"He did not take [bashers'] comments seriously... not genuine." - P8

Participants increasingly questioned both what was said and what was left unsaid. The realization that reveals a deeper understanding of media's power to frame public discourse. Evaluating political messages thus became an act of reading between the lines — recognizing omissions, identifying propaganda techniques, and seeking alternative sources to triangulate truth. This shift from passive consumption to active analysis marks a significant transformation in participants' engagement with political media.

"Some news was withheld" and that "mainstream public news didn't broadcast everything." (P2)

This shift from passive media consumption to active critical analysis is well-supported in media literacy scholarship. According to study, modern media consumers are increasingly aware of how information is framed, and this awareness fosters a more critical engagement with political messages (Wintersieck *et al.*, 2021)^[19]. Hall's encoding/decoding model also emphasizes that audiences are not merely passive recipients of media texts; they actively interpret, negotiate, or even oppose the intended meaning based on their social and cognitive contexts (Xie *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, study highlights that media literacy involves recognizing both explicit content and strategic silences—what is emphasized versus what is omitted. As individuals grow more media literate, they develop the capacity to identify bias, detect propaganda, and critically assess credibility by seeking diverse perspectives. This evolution reflects a maturing media consciousness, where political understanding is constructed through questioning, cross-referencing, and critical reflection (Hobbs, 2024)^[10].

Experience-Based Disappointment

Past Experiences as a Learning Tool: Several participants mentioned how their past disappointments—such as trusting misleading or unverified endorsements—shaped their current approach to credibility assessment. Experiencing disillusionment from products or media messages that failed to meet expectations prompted a more cautious and critical approach in future decision-making. These personal learning experiences acted as a foundation for building more skeptical and independent decision-making habits when interacting with media messages in the future.

The factors students consider when assessing the credibility of authority figures in media messages are multifaceted and dynamic. Initially influenced by admiration and emotional connections, students have increasingly moved towards more critical thinking, independent validation, and fact-checking to ensure the authenticity of media content. Authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness are essential for establishing trust, while commercial motives, partisanship, and selective reporting have heightened skepticism. Disappointments from past experiences have also played a crucial role in shaping a more reflective and cautious approach to media consumption, signaling a shift from blind trust to more empowered and independent decision-making.

Conclusion

Students do not grant trust to media figures solely based on superficial attributes like appearance or fame. Instead, their trust is cultivated through the perception of meaningful and informative content, the establishment of an emotional connection, and the validation of the information by others. This indicates a level of discernment beyond simple deference to authority. The study also highlights a growing skepticism and media awareness among students. They actively engage in critical media practices such as cross-referencing information from multiple sources, scrutinizing the historical track record of media figures, and recognizing potential biases and underlying motives in media presentations, particularly in political messaging. Furthermore, the findings indicate a disillusionment with endorsements, especially in consumer behavior. Students have become wary of celebrity promotions and influencer marketing, often turning to more objective sources like honest reviews and independent research to inform their purchasing decisions. This suggests a developing critical understanding of persuasive techniques employed in media. It is recommended, that students may critically evaluate media messages by questioning authority behind endorsements and seeking multiple sources of information. They may also engage in discussions with peers and teachers to refine decision-making and balance media influence with personal experiences. Independent research is essential, especially when making decisions related to products or political views. In addition, teachers may foster critical thinking and media literacy by creating an environment where students can analyze media messages, recognize biases, and question authority.

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