

## The Credibility of Political Journalism through Social Media among Students at a Public University in Peru

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### Abstract

The study examined the relationship between social media use and credibility in shaping trust in political journalism among students at a public university in Peru. The research followed a quantitative approach with a descriptive and correlational scope. Findings indicate that, when seeking information on social media for personal purposes, university students tend to distrust news related to the political situation and opinions expressed by the branches of the State. Trust in political matters thus remains an unresolved issue, closely linked to the practices exercised by Peruvian political actors and the dynamics of digital journalism.

**Keywords:** political journalism, social media, students, trust.

## Introduction

The proliferation of news across digital media has prompted various political actors to reconsider their participation within the digital environment (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Social networks have emerged as one of the primary sources of information among university students, a highly relevant niche for engagement with political content. These platforms facilitate rapid and large-scale access to information while shaping the ways in which political information is produced, interpreted, and shared (Tandoc et al., 2018). Furthermore, they provide tools that enable political actors to disseminate content and foster community building, thereby complementing traditional media and expanding audience reach (Oliver, 2017).

Nevertheless, the excessive volume of information circulating on social networks raises significant concerns regarding the quality of produced and disseminated content, particularly due to the prevalence of “fake news” and political polarization, both of which have reached alarmingly impactful levels worldwide (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Within digital media, the growth of false news includes commentators who distort factual accuracy solely to increase interactions and comments (Bruns & Nuernbergk, 2019).

According to a study conducted in Spain, social networks constitute the primary digital medium used by young people, who reported engaging with the internet both to satisfy the desire for constant online connection and to meet practical needs (Casas-Mas & Homont, 2024). Moreover, previous research has shown that perceived news quality plays a significant role in decisions to share online content (Bhagat & Kim, 2023).

Prior studies on fake news in digital media have demonstrated that political content and source credibility generate higher levels of audience interaction and commentary (Chaudhuri et al., 2025). Additional evidence indicates that the political use of digital media encourages greater participation among young people (Holt et al., 2013).

Despite these dynamics, reliance on social networks raises critical questions regarding the credibility of political journalism, which scholars have already identified as an area heavily affected by disinformation and algorithmic personalization processes that reinforce existing informational biases (Schäfer & Metag, 2021).

Universities seek to promote truth and knowledge, with students representing their main audience; at the national level, this group accounts for 12.52% of the population. University students experience daily exposure to various forms of fake news. To examine the consequences of political journalism within digital media, this study investigates the relationship between social media use and trust in political journalism among university students in the province of Arequipa. Specifically, the research analyzes the association between the purposes of social media use and dimensions of trust related to the political situation, the executive branch, and political parties in Peru. The study responds to the limited number of investigations that explore journalism through social networks among young people in Latin America in greater depth.

Previous empirical studies conducted among university students in European contexts report similar patterns of skepticism toward political information disseminated through social networks. For instance, research on Spanish university students shows that increased informational use of social media is associated with lower levels of perceived credibility, particularly in political and public affairs content (Gavilan et al., 2022). These findings suggest that distrust in digital political journalism is not context-specific, but rather reflects broader structural dynamics affecting young audiences.

Studies in Latin America have examined the role of digital communication in journalism from a qualitative perspective, addressing issues such as disinformation and source diversity in digital media (Espinoza Guanilo & Espinoza Guanilo, 2024), as well as political communication in digital media and its effects on reliable sources and media monopolies (Martín Cornejo Urbina & Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, 2022). From a quantitative perspective, other research has analyzed technological changes in journalism driven by digital communication processes (Arroyave Cabrera et al., 2023). The present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of political information consumption dynamics within the university context and to provide an empirical foundation for implementing strategies that promote critical and responsible consumption of informational content.

### *Credibility of social Networks*

The role of communication and digital psychology has expanded alongside digital media due to the diversity of available content and its contribution to public opinion, ultimately fostering a state of hyperconnectivity (Curiel, 2015). Young people interact with social networks across multiple domains, with entertainment-related uses predominating; such interactions include following influencers and participating in collective spaces, driven by diverse motivational interests (de Ayala López & Santamaría, 2019). Trust in the content generated on these platforms depends largely on the levels of accuracy and impartiality conveyed to users (Fard & Marvi, 2019).

### *Political Journalism*

Political journalism focuses on news related to political affairs that influence citizens' decisions and actions (Dawson, 2025). These political issues encompass government activity, electoral processes, and legislative debates in which society participates indirectly (Salazar Rebolledo, 2024).

The information provided to citizens facilitates political participation (Lodtmann, 2023), while also enabling the understanding of political processes and encouraging civic engagement grounded in respect and democratic values (Jang & Kreiss, 2024).

The transition toward digital journalism, marked by the incorporation of artificial intelligence tools into journalistic practice, has generated growing distrust toward reliable sources, ultimately affecting citizens' confidence in political information (Forja-Pena et al., 2024).

The digital transformation of political journalism has intensified challenges related to credibility, transparency, and professional mediation. Research in Ibero-American contexts highlights that social networks, while expanding access to political information, also amplify disinformation and weaken traditional trust mechanisms associated with journalistic authority (Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2023; Guallar et al., 2022).

## **Methodology**

The study aligned with the positivist paradigm, which emphasizes participants' observation of the phenomenon under investigation. Following Hernández et al. (2018), the research adopted a quantitative approach aimed at testing the proposed hypothesis through data collection. Within this framework, the study followed a descriptive–correlational scope, seeking to characterize credibility in social networks and attitudes toward political journalism, as well as to determine the association shared by both constructs.

The population comprised university students enrolled at a public university in Arequipa, Peru, during the 2022 academic period, totaling 27,101 students (UNSA, 2022). The sampling strategy relied on non-probabilistic convenience sampling, from which a sample of 313 students was drawn.

All participants in the study sample belonged to the social sciences area. Female students predominated (63%), while male students accounted for the remaining 37%. Most participants fell within the 19–25 age range, representing the youth group, and enrollment covered students from the first to the tenth academic semester.

Researchers approached students through prior authorization granted by undergraduate instructors, and participation occurred following informed consent obtained via an online survey. Data collection took place between July and August 2022.

The Social Media Opinion Scale derived from Frutos et al. (2021) underwent adaptation. The instrument included 18 items and demonstrated content and construct validity through exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation, which yielded two dimensions: Dimension 1, labeled controversial and conflictive content, and Dimension 2, labeled information medium and personal expression. The scale exhibited high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95.

The Political Journalism Scale followed the framework proposed by Salazar Rebolledo (2025) and comprised 19 items distributed across the dimensions of political situation, branches of government, and political parties. Content validity supported the instrument, and reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.742.

Table 1. Operationalization of Variables

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>
Political journalism	Political situation Branches of government Political parties
Credibility of social networks	Controversial and conflictive content Information and personal expression

Note: Authors' own elaboration.

Fieldwork proceeded through an online survey administered in coordination with university instructors and supported by informed consent. Result analysis relied on descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation, given that the data satisfied normality assumptions. Results reporting employed SPSS software, version 26, while data consistency checks relied on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

## Results and Discussion

The study examined two multidimensional variables, for which evidence of validity and reliability underwent assessment. Reliability for the social media opinion variable reached a high level, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95, while the political journalism construct achieved a coefficient of 0.742, exceeding the acceptable threshold. Evidence of internal validity met established criteria through exploratory factor analysis for the first variable, whereas the second variable relied on content validity assessment.

Descriptive results characterize the dimensions of political journalism.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Dimensions of Political Journalism

<b>Statistics</b>	<b>Political situation</b>	<b>Branches of government</b>	<b>Political parties</b>
N (Valid)	313	313	313
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	2.90	2.99	3.70
Median	2.86	3.00	3.67
Standard deviation	0.66	0.57	0.74
Range	4	4	4
Minimum	1	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5

Note. N = 313. Authors' own elaboration.

Trust promoted by mass media through political journalism remains limited, largely due to transparency concerns surrounding information flows during the post-COVID period. A

moderate level of trust in political parties prevailed as media coverage addressed the consequences of the pandemic and strategies for economic recovery. This trust, reflected on social networks, stemmed mainly from rhetorical language aimed at aligning with the demands of the Peruvian population (Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

Political information related to the general political situation circulating on social networks received a moderate evaluation from nearly half of university students, a perception influenced by the polarized positions adopted by political journalists across digital platforms (Broersma, 2021).

The findings of this study show that Peruvian university students display a moderate level of trust in political journalism disseminated through social networks. This result aligns with prior research indicating that young people tend to distrust digital media due to the widespread proliferation of fake news (Swart et al., 2022).

Table 3. Correlation Between the Purposes of Social Media Use and Trust in Political News in Digital Media

Variables	Trust in political situation news of the country through digital media
<b>Social media opinion</b>	
Pearson correlation	-0.134*
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.018
N	313
<b>Controversial content and internal interest</b>	
Pearson correlation	-0.036
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.523
N	313
<b>Information gathering and personal opinion</b>	
Pearson correlation	-0.243**
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.000
N	313

Note. Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

$p < 0.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Authors' own elaboration.

University students display diverse motivations for engaging with social networks and consuming political news about the country through these platforms. Distrust predominates, and the relationship appears inverse and statistically significant ( $r = -0.134$ ;  $p = 0.018$ ). As shown in the table, the pursuit of controversial content through social networks shows no association with credibility regarding news reporting on the political situation in Peru ( $r = -0.036$ ). By contrast, when the primary purpose involves staying informed, trust in news related to the political situation decreases and follows an inverse pattern ( $r = -0.243$ ).

One factor associated with this perception of credibility relates to the source of information. As demonstrated in previous studies, trust in political journalism varies according to the reputation of the media outlet and the journalists who disseminate the news (Casero-Ripollés, 2021). In the present study, the data suggest that students favor traditional sources adapted to the digital environment, such as the web portals of reputable newspapers, over social media profiles of independent journalists or political influencers.

Table 4. Correlation Between the Purposes of Social Media Use and Trust in Journalism on the Branches of Government in Digital Media

Variables	Credibility of traditional media regarding journalism on the branches of government	Credibility of digital media regarding journalism on the branches of government
<b>Social media opinion</b>		
Pearson correlation	-0.025	-0.191**
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.653	0.001
N	313	313
<b>Controversial content and internal interest</b>		
Pearson correlation	0.013	-0.110
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.812	0.053
N	313	313
<b>Information gathering and personal opinion</b>		
Pearson correlation	-0.074	-0.268**
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.192	0.000
N	313	313

Note. Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

$p < 0.01$ .

Authors' own elaboration.

When university students seek to disseminate controversial content on social networks, the relationship with trust in digital media regarding news about the branches of government appears inverse and weak ( $r = -0.11$ ). By contrast, when information seeking constitutes the primary purpose of social media use, trust in digital media also follows an inverse relationship ( $r = -0.268$ ).

These results support the notion that exposure to biased content depends on users' discernment, which relates closely to their level of media literacy (García & Kim, 2024).

Table 5. Trust in Journalism on Political Party News in Digital Media

Variables	Trust in journalism on political party news in digital media
<b>Social media opinion</b>	
Pearson correlation	0.008
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.894
N	313
<b>Controversial content and internal interest</b>	
Pearson correlation	0.065
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.255
N	313
<b>Information gathering and personal opinion</b>	
Pearson correlation	-0.071
Sig. (two-tailed)	0.210
N	313

Note. Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

$p < 0.01$ .

Authors' own elaboration.

Regarding the relationship between university students' social media use and trust in political party news disseminated through digital media, Pearson's correlation analysis indicates no statistically significant association, either for the role of controversial content ( $r = 0.065$ ) or for information-seeking purposes ( $r = -0.071$ ).

## Conclusions

The study objective confirmed that sustained use of social networks contributes to perceptions of distrust regarding the political situation reflected in content generated and shared among university students, as indicated by a statistically significant but weak relationship ( $r = -0.134$ ). Although political content consumption on social networks prevailed, trust placed in information sources and content quality remained considerably low. Students showed a greater willingness to rely on traditional sources adapted to the digital environment (web portals and established media outlets) rather than on influencers or independent journalists operating on platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (X).

The inverse and weak correlations observed in this study are consistent with prior quantitative research. Studies focusing on university students indicate that the more social networks are used for information-seeking purposes, the greater the critical distance adopted toward political news credibility (Gavilan et al., 2022; Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2023). This reinforces the notion that

distrust does not necessarily stem from disinterest, but rather from heightened exposure to fragmented, polarized, and unverifiable content.

When examining information-gathering and opinion-forming purposes underlying students' social media use, the analysis demonstrated a significant and negative effect on trust in news related to the political situation. By contrast, using social networks to generate controversial content showed no association with trust in political situation news.

Nevertheless, this pattern raises concerns regarding the spread of unverified information, as users tend to place greater trust in content that reinforces preexisting beliefs, thereby contributing to the formation of informational bubbles.

Future research should compare social media credibility across generations and conduct comparative analyses involving other universities and higher education institutions. Collaborative studies with Latin American countries would further enable the examination of similarities in trust toward social networks in relation to political issues.

The study faced two limitations. First, the sample followed a non-probabilistic design due to restricted access to the full student population across academic units. Second, as a preventive measure against COVID-19 variants, data collection proceeded exclusively through an online survey modality.

Regarding implications for citizenship, the findings indicate that political content circulating on social networks exerts a negative influence, underscoring the need for universities to promote digital literacy while encouraging media organizations to communicate objectives transparently within digital content.

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