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Influencing the news: how social media influencers affect news media trust

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how social media influencers (SMIs) affected news media trust in the U.S. SMI followers reported more trust than non-followers even as they reported high levels of trust in influencers. This includes trust in information from the news media as well as trust in various media practices. Trust in SMI news content also improved media trust among followers and non-followers. Contrary to prior research, social media news trust did not reduce news media trust, but rather, improved it. Likewise, Conservative ideology only reduced news media trust among non-followers, with no effect among SMI followers. Overall, interacting with SMI news content did not reduce news media trust. Data suggest that SMIs play a complementary and supportive role regarding news media trust.

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“Mainstream news brands and journalists struggle to cut through on TikTok” (Newman, 2024, para 11). This excerpt from the Newman et al. (2024) illustrates the reach that social media-driven news has had at the expense of mainstream news. First, the report, based on an international sample, found that people most often sought social media influencers (SMIs) for news (Newman et al., 2024). When considering activity on various social media platforms, mainstream media sources were the most sought after in only two of the six platforms examined, namely X and Facebook. Influencers and other personalities were the most sought after among the other platforms. Key among the reasons driving these trends was low trust in mainstream news sources (40% on average). This level of trust was well below that of news sourced from any of the social media platforms examined in that study. Other research reflects this, showing that among young people and Conservatives in the U.S., trust in social media information stands at par with trust in the national news media (Liedke & Gottfried, 2022, para. 2; para. 7).

This puts the mainstream news media generally, and especially that in the U.S., in a precarious position. For one, media trust in the U.S. stands at 32% overall, which is an all-time low (Brennan, 2023, para. 1). Second, not only did this trust level not improve between 2023 and 2024, but it also ranked among the lowest in the world compared to media in Finland and Kenya, who led with a 69% trust rating respectively (Watson, 2024). Additionally, this is a persistent problem because it reflects trends in the Newman

et al. (2021) where the U.S. media came in last among the 46 countries surveyed with a 29% trust level (Newman et al., 2021).

As I discuss in later sections, several reasons may explain the trust-related dynamics discussed above. For instance, influencers are highly trusted by their followers who see them as authentic and relatable (Leite & de Baptista, 2022; Lou, 2022). Additionally, influencers have more leeway in their work as they are not bound by professional standards of objectivity, rigor, and formality like journalists (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024). Meanwhile, social media use generally diminishes media trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020). The related social media misinformation, some of which is disseminated by influencers, exacerbates this situation (Ahmed et al., 2020; Center for Countering Digital hate, 2021; Ognyanova et al., 2020). Additionally, not only does ideological partisanship affect media trust (Gottfried et al., 2020, para. 4, para. 7; Jurkowitz et al., 2020, para 10–12), but social media use and following SMIs also play roles in this process (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Garrett & Bond, 2021; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Stocking et al., 2022, para. 5). Even then, there lacks research examining the amalgam of these trust-related variables. Therefore, the current study adopts a systematic and comparative approach by first comparing SMI followers and non-followers regarding news media trust, SMI news trust, and social media news trust. The study also examines how trust in SMI news, trust in social media news, and ideological partisanship affect news media trust.

The role of social media influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) are a cadre of self-made personalities who create and share monetized content to dedicated followers. They also deploy unique branding and presentation techniques to connect with followers (Bause, 2021; Geysler, 2022). This allows them to build uniquely intimate and powerful relationships with their followers, unlike personalities like celebrities and other traditional public figures (Abidin, 2015; Rojek, 2015). As a result, followers perceive SMIs to be highly relatable, credible, and trustworthy (Leite & de Baptista, 2022; Lou, 2022). This makes them powerful opinion leaders among their followers (Bause, 2021).

Some of this influence goes beyond generic content creation and dissemination as it affects news consumption. According to the aforementioned Newman et al. (2024), influencers have overtaken journalists as the preferred sources for news among the general public on the majority of social media platforms (Newman et al., 2024). Additionally, SMIs are most impactful among young adults (Matsa, 2023, para. 3). While the role of influencers in disseminating fake news and other misinformation is well documented (Moran et al., 2024; Wasike, 2022), other research shows that their influence on news is broader as SMIs also disseminate regular news (McEnnis, 2023). Some influencers also share situational information during crises (Li et al., 2022), and some have been used by public agencies to share health information (Bonnievie et al., 2020).

Influencers and journalists also have a unique confluence. For instance, journalists may source from influencer content, and this improves news readership when followers read news referencing their favorite influencer's work (Anđelić, 2021). Other research shows that while influencers are not held up to journalistic standards regarding objectivity and rigor, many journalists still acknowledge that some influencer work meets journalistic standards (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024). Additionally, some journalists are

influencers themselves (Flamino et al., 2023). These may be independent journalist influencers with prior media backgrounds and credentials or journo-influencers, who are journalist influencers posting content under the purview of a media organization they work for (Leinonen, 2022; Levison, 2024, para. 5).

While some independent journalist influencers like former CNN anchor Don Lemon post on platforms like YouTube (The Daily Beast Podcast & Seinfeld, 2025, para. 7), others post content on subscription platforms like Substack and Patreon (Stenberg, 2021). A notable journo-influencer is ESPN's sports journalist Stephen A. Smith who runs an eponymous YouTube sports channel (Williams, 2024, para 1). Like traditional influencers, journalist influencers must also develop unique personal brands when interacting with followers (Finneman et al., 2019; Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013). Given the general lack of trust in mainstream news media, such cross-media activity may improve media trust given that influencers improve trust and credibility by communicating shared values, and the fact that people who favor certain journalists professionally may follow them on social media (Leinonen, 2022).

Regardless of the nature of the influencer, trust is key in the influencer-follower relationship. Generally, influencers are well trusted by their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Leite & de Baptista, 2022; Lou, 2022). This also applies to influencers who dabble in news content. For one, people who trust regular news media may also trust news from the SMIs they follow (Martin & Sharma, 2022). This suggests that SMIs can tap into mainstream media news trust, and for good reason. Influencers do not always post controversial content, and sometimes they post content mirroring mainstream media news. An example is how influencers emphasize the human interest frame at the expense of divisive political content (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Motahar et al., 2024). Also, some influencers avoid opinionated content and focus on objective information that reflects journalistic standards, especially when publishing on short content platforms like TikTok (Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023). Even when posting political content, SMIs may focus on content that mainstream news media does not cover, but which still aligns with prevailing public opinion (Peter & Muth, 2023).

This is not to say that exposure to influencer content does not create distrust. Influencers, especially those who share misinformation and conspiratory-laden content, dampen institutional trust among their followers by attacking experts (Ahmed et al., 2020; Center for Countering Digital hate, 2021). Additionally, research indicates that partisan intermediaries who share news via social media increase news media distrust among their followers (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). It helps little that influencers are susceptible to clout chasing, and this then leads to the temptation to spread sensational and shock value information regardless of its accuracy as long as it increases engagement with followers (Ceylan et al., 2023). Such habits are consequential because, as I discuss later, misinformation susceptibility is a predictor of news media distrust (Lima-Quintanilha et al., 2019; Ognyanova et al., 2020).

Social media and news media trust

Institutional trust in is fundamental to stable democracies (Craig Niemi & Silver, 1990; Zmerli, 2014). This includes trust in the news media (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). News media trust is “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on

the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5). This derives from the concept of trust where the trustor (the news consumer) accepts a level of risk in their relationship with the trustee (the news media), with the expectation of acquiring certain returns (Sapir, 2022; Schoorman et al., 2007). Trust is associated with plethora of benefits such as faith in government (Zmerli, 2014), participation in the political process (Schraff, 2021), reduced misinformation susceptibility (Anspach & Carlson, 2020), and most important to this study, with news consumption and related behavior.

As mentioned, trust in the news media has reached all-time lows and reasons such as social media use and partisanship are responsible. First, not only does consuming news from social media reduce the general trust in institutions (Ceron, 2015), it specifically reduces trust in the news media (Park et al., 2020). Furthermore, those who use social media as their main source of news report significantly lower trust in news than those who use mainstream sources (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). Additionally, users trust news recommended by social media friends more than they trust news recommended by mainstream news sources because of the opinion leadership of these friends (Turcotte et al., 2015). Other research echoes these findings, only this time pertaining to trusting and engaging with news stories shared by public figures, where recipients trust news regardless of the legitimacy of the source (Sterrett et al., 2019).

The legitimacy of news sources is important because misinformation susceptibility caused by consuming social media content also reduces news trust. For instance, social media news trust increases a person’s susceptibility to misinformation (Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Xiao et al., 2021). Social media news trust is “the extent to which an individual believes that the news she or he consumed from social media platforms is trustworthy” (Xiao et al., 2021, p. 980). Such trust is consequential when dealing with social media misinformation. Specifically, exposure to fake news reduces news trust (Ognyanova et al., 2020). On the other hand, familiarity with fake news reduces its impact on news trust (Lima-Quintanilha et al., 2019). Exposure to other misinformation such as deepfakes also reduces news trust, especially among those uncertain about detecting the falsity involved (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Deepfakes are realistic AI-enhanced videos that falsely attribute actions and speech to subjects in a video, and they have been widely used in misinformation campaigns (Sample, 2020). Given the discussion above, this study queried about the effect of following SMIs on news media trust.

RQ1: Do SMI followers trust the news media more than non-followers?

RQ2a: Do SMI followers trust news from influencers more than non-followers?

RQ2b: Does trust in SMI news affect news media trust more among SMI followers than among non-followers?

RQ3a: Do SMI followers trust social media news more than non-followers?

RQ3b: Does trust in social media news affect news media trust more among SMI followers than among non-followers?

RQ4a: Do SMI followers use traditional media differently from non-followers?

RQ4b: Does traditional media use affect news media trust more among SMI followers than among non-followers?

Ideology, news trust, and social media

The partisan divide in the U.S. regarding news media trust is well documented. Conservatives report low trust in mainstream sources like CNN and Liberals distrust sources like Fox News (Jurkowitz et al., 2020, para. 10–12). Data also shows that U.S. Conservatives are generally skeptical of journalists and mainstream media sources and specifically skeptical of the media's accuracy and truthfulness (Gottfried et al., 2020, para. 4, para. 7). This, coupled with perceptions of political bias in news reporting among Conservatives, (Hassell et al., 2020), reflects the absolute hostile media phenomenon. This phenomenon emerges when partisans perceive hostile bias in news coverage that non-partisans see as neutral and objective (Vallone et al., 1985). This is important because perceptions of partisanship in the news coverage affect media trust (Blom, 2021). Furthermore, political trust and news media trust are associated (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Lee, 2010).

Social media affects this process. While social media does not necessarily exacerbate traditional or offline news fragmentation (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), it allows for exposure to both alternative media sources, and therefore transferring fragmentation into digital space (Steppat et al., 2023). This is noteworthy because fragmentation by itself increases news media distrust (Peng & Yang, 2022). A consequence is the rise of alternative sites catering to skeptics of both mainstream media and major social media networks. These alternatives include Parler, Gab, and Rumble (Klepper & Seitz, 2021, para 6–7). These sites are sharply partisan (Stocking et al., 2022, para. 5) and prone to spreading misinformation among trusting users (Baines et al., 2021; Thompson, 2022, para 2). This partisanship and misinformation ultimately reduce news trust (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Garrett & Bond, 2021). Even in the absence of misinformation, social media news reduces news trust. For one, news shared by political partisans on social media reduces the trust in news (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). Additionally, while partisan consumption of social media news undermines trust in political institutions, this effect is lower among those who consume news from mainstream sources (Ceron, 2015). The discussion above suggests that partisanship affects trust, hence RQ5.

RQ5: Does ideology affect news media trust more among SMI followers than among non-followers?

Method

The sample of social media users ($n = 1,225$) was randomly selected from a Qualtrics panel and was designed to reflect U.S. Census demographics such as race and ethnicity, gender, income, party identification and geographical region. Research shows that Qualtrics panels and similar sampling methods are well suited for survey research (Brandon et al., 2014; Holt & Loraas, 2019; Lee et al., 2018). This study was approved by the author's Institutional Review Board before data collection. Data were collected between August 9–22, 2024.

Because the study examines SMI followers, two screening questions were used. First, respondents indicated how often they used social media based on the following options – multiple times a day, once a day, often but not daily, and rarely/never. Those who rarely or never used social media were dropped from the study. To determine SMI followers, the rest of the respondents first read a definition of an influencer as shown below.

They then indicated whether they followed one based on a binary yes/no response. Note that the definition below omits references to monetized content. Therefore, this definition broadens the conceptualization of an influencer to include journo-influencers who may post content as part of their job rather than solely for purposes of influence and monetization (Flamino et al., 2023).

By social media influencers, we mean people on social media who have a reputation for their knowledge and expertise about certain topics. They regularly create and post content about those topics on their social media accounts, and they may have many followers who pay attention to that.

On average, the sample was 48 years old and was 51% female and 5% non-binary/other. Race/ethnicity was: Non-Hispanic white = 60.7%; non-Hispanic Black = 10.2%; Hispanic = 15.8%; Asian = 3.5%; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander = 0.6%; American Indian and Alaska Native = 2.4%; mixed race or other = 7%. Annual household income was: Less than \$50,000 = 36.1%; \$50,000–\$100,000 = 33.2%; and \$100,000 and above = 30.7%. Region was: Northeast = 17.4%; Midwest = 21.5%; West = 22.4%, and South = 38.7%.

Variable measurement

News media trust

As shown in the appendix and Tables 1 and 2, news media trust was measured by two scales as advised by Strömbäck et al. (2020). Before answering the questions, respondents first read a notice that news referred to national, international, regional/local news, and other topical events (Newman et al., 2024; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The first scale included five questions querying about the general trustworthiness of media organizations and media personalities. This includes trust in media organizations like CNN, Fox News, Wall Street Journal, and MSNBC, and trust in personalities like journalists, politicians, scientists, and religious leaders. An example is – *Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from U.S. media like newspapers, radio, television, online news sites, etc.?* Responses were captured on a 1–5 scale where 1 = not at all trustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy.

The second scale contained 20 questions asking about trust in media practices across four categories. The categories were (a) media practices in general, (b) media types such as radio, TV, and newspapers, (c) journalists, and (d) media content. Here, respondents

Table 1. Comparisons of Trust in News Media Information Between SMI followers and Non-followers.

	Follower	Means	S.D.	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
From the news media in general	Yes	3.34	1.16	5.47	.001	.31
	No	2.98	1.11			
From radio, TV, and newspapers	Yes	3.39	1.07	4.72	.001	.27
	No	3.10	1.09			
From individual media brands	Yes	3.37	1.19	6.14	.001	.35
	No	2.96	1.16			
From Journalists and other personalities	Yes	3.28	1.08	6.50	.001	.37
	No	2.89	1.02			
When covering issues	Yes	3.35	1.12	3.80	.001	.22
	No	3.11	1.05			

Note: SMI follower *N* = 731; Non-follower *N* = 525; *df* = 1,254.

Table 2. Comparisons of Trust in News Media Practices Between SMI followers and Non-followers.

Trust Parameters	Follower	Means	S.D.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
News media in general	Yes	2.99	1.09	6.78	.001	.39
	No	2.57	1.06			
Radio, TV, and newspapers	Yes	2.99	1.09	6.78	.001	.39
	No	2.57	1.06			
Journalists	Yes	3.05	1.07	5.67	.001	.32
	No	2.71	1.06			
Media coverage of issues	Yes	2.99	1.10	4.85	.001	.28
	No	2.69	1.08			

Note: SMI follower *N* = 731; Non-follower *N* = 525; *df* = 1,256.

indicated their agreement with statements about media practices based on a 1–5 scale where: 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree. Below is an example of statements from the *media content* category:

Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the media's coverage of topics such as the economy, foreign affairs, health, the environment, crime, etc.?

- The media are fair when covering these topics.
- The media are unbiased when covering these topics.
- The media tell the whole story when covering these topics.
- The media are accurate when covering these topics.
- The media separate facts from opinions when covering these topics.

A composite media trust score was then computed from the average of the responses from questions in the two scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Social media news trust

Here, a single question adopted from Xiao et al.'s (2021) study of social media news trust was used. Respondents indicated how trustworthy they deemed news and information from social media was based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = not at all trustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy.

SMI news trust

Here too, respondents indicated how much they deemed news and information from influencers was trustworthy based on the 1–5 trustworthiness scale.

Traditional media use

Respondents were asked how often they used radio, television, and newspapers, both print and online, for news and information. The question was measured on a 1–5 rarely/never to very often scale (Martin & Sharma, 2022).

Ideology

As done in previous studies, ideology was measured as an interval/ratio variable rather than categorically (Pfattheicher & Schindler, 2016; van Prooijen et al., 2022). Respondents first indicated their general ideological leaning based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = very Liberal and 5 = very Conservative. Using the same scale, they then indicated how Conservative or Liberal they were regarding the economy, abortion,

and LGBTQ + rights as done in Dennin et al. (2022) and Sterling et al. (2016). An ideology score was then computed from an average of the responses with a higher score denoting more Conservatism (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

Results

RQ1 compared SMI and non-SMI followers regarding media trust. Overall, trust was 2.94 (s.d. = .97) on scale of 1–5. However, independent sample t-test analysis indicated that SMI followers were more trusting than non-followers (Mean_{followers} = 3.09, s.d. = .96; Mean_{non-followers} = 2.73, s.d. = .96; $p < .001$; $t = 6.50$; Cohen's $d = .37$). SMI followers also reported more trust when the itemized trust parameters were considered. See table 1. These includes trust in information from radio, TV, and newspapers, from individual media organizations, from journalists and personalities such as politicians, and when the media covers topics such as the economy, healthcare, the environment. Additionally, SMI followers reported more trust in journalistic practices such as fairness, objectivity, comprehensiveness, accuracy, and the separation of facts from opinions when reporting the news. See table 2.

RQ2a queried about trusting news and information from SMIs. Unsurprisingly, SMI followers were more trusting (Mean_{followers} = 3.16, s.d. = 1.15; Mean_{non-followers} = 2.18, s.d. = 1.10; $p < .001$; $t = 15.42$; Cohen's $d = .88$). Regarding RQ2b however, OLS regression showed that the impact of SMI trust on media trust did not differ much between followers ($\beta_{followers} = .29$, $p < .001$, $t = 6.86$) and non-followers ($\beta_{non-followers} = .26$, $p < .001$; $t = 4.82$). First, the difference in the two main effects is marginal. Second, trusting news and information from SMIs positively impacted trusting the media both among followers and non-followers. Third, SMI news trust and media trust were positively correlated among both followers and non-followers, albeit with a stronger association among followers ($r_{followers} = .52$, $p < .001$; $r_{non-followers} = .35$, $p < .001$). See Tables 3–6.

Regarding social media news and information (RQ3a), SMI followers reported more trust (Mean_{followers} = 3.18, s.d. = 1.15; Mean_{non-followers} = 2.32, s.d. = 1.08; $p < .001$; $t = 13.48$; Cohen's $d = .77$). Additionally, social media news trust improved media trust more among followers ($\beta_{followers} = .25$, $p < .001$, $t = 5.77$) than among non-followers ($\beta_{non-followers} = .13$, $p < .05$; $t = 2.33$) – RQ3b. Even though both variables were positively correlated, the association was stronger among followers ($r_{followers} = .52$, $p < .001$) than among non-followers ($r_{non-followers} = .34$, $p < .001$).

RQ4 queried about the effect of using traditional media on media trust. SMI followers marginally used more traditional media than non-followers (Mean_{followers} = 3.71, s.d. = 1.20; Mean_{non-followers} = 3.56, s.d. = 1.41; $p < .05$; $t = 2.041$; Cohen's $d = .12$). Likewise,

Table 3. Correlations among SMI followers.

	Means	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
Trust average	3.09	.96	–				
Social media news trust	3.18	1.15	.52**	–			
SMI news trust	3.16	1.15	.52**	.71**	–		
Traditional media use	3.71	1.20	.33**	.28**	.24**	–	
Conservative ideology	3.26	1.04	.19**	.27**	.28**	.10*	–

* $p = .05$; * $p = .01$

Table 4. Correlations among non-followers.

	Means	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
Trust average	2.73	.96	–				
Social media news trust	2.32	1.08	.34**	–			
SMI news trust	2.18	1.07	.36**	.68**	–		
Traditional media use	3.56	1.41	.26**	.23**	.15**	–	
Ideology	3.10	1.10	–.10*	.07	.14**	.10*	–

* $p = .05$; ** $p = .01$.

traditional media use was more correlated with media trust among SMI followers ($r_{followers} = .33$, $p < .001$) than among non-followers ($r_{non-followers} = .26$, $p < .001$). However, using traditional media marginally improved media trust more among non-followers ($\beta_{non-followers} = .21$, $p < .001$; $t = 5.10$) than among followers ($\beta_{followers} = .19$, $p < .001$, $t = 6.10$).

Lastly, RQ5 queried the effect of ideology. First, SMI followers were more Conservative leaning (Mean $_{followers} = 3.26$, s.d. = 1.04; Mean $_{non-followers} = 3.10$, s.d. = 1.10; $p < .01$; $t = 2.66$; Cohen's $d = .15$). Also, ideology was more positively correlated with media trust among followers ($r = .19$, $p < .001$), and there was no such correlation among non-followers. Regardless, ideology only impacted media trust among non-followers ($\beta_{non-followers} = -.16$, $p < .001$; $t = 24.11$) with no effect among followers. This means that while Conservatism did not affect media trust among SMI followers, being Conservative significantly reduced media trust among non-followers.

Discussion

Social media influencers now compete with mainstream media as sources of news (Newman et al., 2024). This comes as trust levels for the news media plummet (Brenan, 2023; Liedke & Gottfried, 2022). Meanwhile, SMIs enjoy high levels of trust among their followers (Leite & de Baptista, 2022; Lou, 2022). Therefore, this study systematically examined how pertinent variables affect these trust dynamics. Data supported prior research regarding the high levels of trust for SMIs. The fact that non-followers trusted SMI news and information a tad less than they trusted mainstream media shows the extent of their influence. Here, SMIs scored 2.18 compared to 2.73 for the news media. Noteworthy did that trust SMI news and information did not take away from news media trust. Case in point, SMI followers were more trusting of the media than non-followers. Also, trusting SMI news and information only improved trust in the media both among followers and non-followers, with a larger effect among followers. This reflects prior research showing positive correlations among using SMIs as a news source and legacy media use including print and TV (Martin & Sharma, 2022). At the minimum, SMIs complement mainstream media and at best they boost trust in mainstream media.

Another important finding is that social media news trust did not reduce news media trust, thus contradicting research showing an inverse association (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020), but reflecting other research showing a positive correlation between using Instagram and Facebook and print legacy media use (Martin & Sharma, 2022). Sharma study that also reported positive correlation between Also, social media news trust improved news media trust among followers and non-followers, with a bigger improvement among followers. Because SMI followers reported using traditional media

Table 5. OLS Regression predicting news media trust results among SMI followers.

	β	S.E.	p	t	VIF
Constant		.13	.001	7.806	
Social media news trust	.25	.036	.001	5.77	2.06
SMI news trust	.29	.036	.001	6.86	2.03
Use of traditional news media	.19	.025	.001	6.10	1.09
Conservative Ideology	.02	.029	.49	.69	1.10

Note: $R^2 = .35$; Adj. $R^2 = .34$; $N = 731$.

more than non-followers, this too suggests that SMIs are not a threat to mainstream. Moreover, mainstream media use improved news media trust among SMI followers and non-followers alike.

Ideology also returned unique findings. Conservatism was positively correlated with news media trust among SMI followers and it reduced trust only among non-followers. This contradicts research on the effect of Conservatism on news media distrust in the U.S. (Gottfried et al., 2020, para. 4, para. 7). It also contradicts other research attributing this distrust to SMIs (Ahmed et al., 2020; Center for Countering Digital hate, 2021; Karl- sen & Aalberg, 2023), as well as research showing that news shared by partisan interme- diaries reduces media trust (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023). This suggests that the association between partisan ideology and media distrust in the U.S. is more nuanced than assumed (Hassell et al., 2020; Jurkowitz et al., 2020, para 10–12) given that Conservative voices are more pronounced on some social media platforms (González-Bailón et al., 2022). On the other hand, it reflects research showing that some influencers avoid opinionated and divisive content and that some even share news matching mainstream media frames (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Motahar et al., 2024; Sehl & Schützeneder, 2023).

Implications and limitations

This study makes theoretical and practical implications. It is among the first to compre- hensively examine an amalgam of trust-related variables regarding SMIs. Most pertinent scholarly work, even that cited here, uses piecemeal approaches. Other pertinent work appears in non-scholarly venues (Leinonen, 2022; Levison, 2024; Stenberg, 2021). This study also found nuanced and unique patters regarding the effect of SMIs and ideology on media trust, and this informs future research. The study also adds to communication research given that it is 'among the few that empirically examined news trust among SMIs. Practically, the findings indicate that SMIs play a unique role regarding news dis- semination and consumption. Even though some SMIs may have rightfully earned repu- tations as agents of misinformation and purveyors of fake news, most SMIs who dabble in news content are beneficial to mainstream media. Data indicated that news-oriented

Table 6. OLS Regression predicting news media trust among non-followers.

	β	S.E.	p	T	VIF
Constant		.150	.001	12.53	
Social media news trust	.13	.048	.02	2.33	1.94
SMI news trust	.26	.048	.001	4.82	1.91
Use of traditional news media	.21	.027	.001	5.11	1.06
Conservative ideology	-.16	.035	.001	-4.11	1.03

Note: $R^2 = .35$; Adj. $R^2 = .34$; $N = 731$.

influencers play a complimentary role to mainstream media. Therefore, collaborating with SMIs in media production and dissemination is beneficial given that the high levels of trust they enjoy among their followers may improve media trust.

The study also comes with certain limitations. As mentioned, some journalists are influencers. However, this study did not distinguish between self-made SMIs and journalist influencers. Additionally, this study only examined the effect of SMIs on trust. It did not examine variables such as news literacy, which is associated with news media trust (Luo et al., 2022; Paisana et al., 2020). Also, the study examined SMIs as an amalgam without differentiating them by the content they share. A more nuanced approach would have elicited areas in which SMIs are more impactful. A multi-wave survey would also have elicited longitudinal effects that the cross-sectional survey may not have revealed. Therefore, future studies may use multi-wave surveys that incorporate news literacy and also examine different genres of news content such as sports, economic, technology, and health, among others as well as compare trust between followers of traditional influencers and journalist influencer's followers.

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Notes on Contributor

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Data availability statement

The data is available from the author upon request.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

News Media Trust

Scale 1: General trust in the information coming from the news media

The following questions ask about your opinion on the news.

Answer the questions based on a scale of 1–5 where: 1 = not at all trustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy:

- Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in the U.S.?
- Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from U.S. media like newspapers, radio, television, online news sites, etc.
- Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from media like CNN, Fox News, Wall Street Journal, MSNBC?
- Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from groups of people like journalists, politicians, scientists, religious leaders, etc.?
- Generally speaking, to what extent do you trust information from the news media in the U.S. when they cover topics such as the economy, foreign affairs, health, the environment, crime, etc.?

Scale 2: Trust in Media Practices

News Media in General

Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about newspapers/television/radio in the U.S.?

Answer the questions based on a scale of 1–5 where: 1 = totally disagree and 5 = totally agree:

- The news media are fair when covering the news
- The news media are unbiased when covering the news
- The news media tell the whole story when covering the news
- The news media are accurate when covering the news
- The news media separate facts from opinions when covering the news

Media Type

Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about newspapers/television/radio in the U.S.?

- Newspapers/television/radio are fair when covering the news
- Newspapers/television/radio are unbiased when covering the news
- Newspapers/television/radio tell the whole story when covering the news
- Newspapers/television/radio are accurate when covering the news
- Newspapers/television/radio separate facts from opinions when covering the news

Journalists

Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about journalists in the U.S.?

- Journalists are fair when covering the news
- Journalists are unbiased when covering the news
- Journalists tell the whole story when covering the news
- Journalists are accurate when covering the news
- Journalists separate facts from opinion when covering the news

Media Content

- Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the media's coverage of topics such as the economy, foreign affairs, health, the environment, crime, etc.?
- The media are fair when covering these topics.
- The media are unbiased when covering these topics.
- The media tell the whole story when covering these topics.
- The media are accurate when covering these topics.
- The media separate facts from opinions when covering these topics.

SMI News Trust

Answer the question below based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = not at all trustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy.

Generally speaking, to what extent do you think that news and information from social media influencers is trustworthy?

Social Media News Trust

Answer the question below based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = not at all trustworthy and 5 = very trustworthy.

Generally speaking, to what extent do you think that news and information from social media in general is trustworthy?

Traditional Media Use

Answer the question below based on a 1–5 scale where 1 = rarely and 5 = very frequently.

How often do you use radio, television, print, and online newspapers as sources for news and information?

Ideology

Answer the following questions on a scale of 1–5 where: 1 = strongly Liberal and 5 = strongly Conservative.

- Generally, how Liberal or Conservative do you consider yourself to be?
- In reference to fiscal policy and economic issues, how Liberal or Conservative do you consider yourself to be?
- Regarding social issues like abortion and LGBTQ + rights, how Liberal or Conservative do you consider yourself to be.