

Disinformation Perceptions and Media Trust: The Moderating Roles of Political Trust and Values

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Many observers have been concerned with the possible negative consequences of the proliferation of fake news and disinformation, including a decline in media trust. This study attempts to document the negative relationship between media trust and perceived severity of disinformation, measured in terms of perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and perceived influence of disinformation on society. Moreover, this study argues that political trust and political values would orient people's responses to the phenomenon of disinformation. Hence, they would moderate the relationship between perceived severity of disinformation and media trust. Analysis of a survey in Hong Kong ($N = 1,014$) shows that perceived severity of the disinformation problem relates negatively to general media trust. The negative relationship is particularly strong among people who trust governmental institutions more, believe in law and order more, and emphasize civil liberties less. General implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: disinformation, perceptions, media trust, political trust, political values, Hong Kong

Much research on the impact of disinformation exposure and perceptions has been published in recent years as the problem of "fake news"—as an actually existing genre of content or a label (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019)—captures the attention of academics, civic society actors, and the public. It is widely believed that the prevalence of fake news and disinformation is intricately related to people's trust in the news media: A lack of trust in the news media leads some people to believe in disinformation (Ryan, 2021), and disinformation further lowers people's trust in the news (Hameleers et al., 2022).

While the argument is widely adopted, we still need more empirical evidence to demonstrate the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust in different contexts (unless otherwise specified, media trust in this article refers to trust in the news media in particular). Moreover, individuals do not necessarily react to disinformation and fake news in the same way. Various factors influence how people respond to political stimuli and hence shape the impact of the stimuli on other attitudes and behavior. A more complete analysis of the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust should involve an examination of how certain variables may moderate the relationship.

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Specifically, this article examines the moderating role of political trust and political values. Journalism scholars have noted that people tend to see news media and political institutions as interlinked. Hence media trust and political trust are positively correlated (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018). However, this study contends that given the presence of the disinformation problem, people may see the news media differently depending on whether they trust the government or not. Besides, political scientists have long noted the power of political values to orientate people in the complex political world (Feldman, 1988; McCann, 1997; McClosky & Zaller, 1984). This study expects political values, especially people's belief in law and order and belief in civil liberties, to influence the way people react to the fake news and disinformation phenomenon.

This article tests hypotheses derived from the above arguments with a survey in Hong Kong, where "fake news" has also aroused fervent debates in the most recent years (Leung & Cheng, 2021). This study will provide a richer picture of how disinformation perceptions relate to media trust. The findings should have theoretical and practical implications on how we should approach the fake news problem.

The article begins by discussing the concepts of disinformation perceptions and media trust. It then discusses how political trust and values could shape people's responses to fake news and disinformation. Hypotheses are set up in the process. The survey method and findings are then presented. Implications of the findings are discussed at the end.

Disinformation Perceptions and Media Trust

When understood as a genre, disinformation can be defined as "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20), and fake news can be regarded as disinformation presented in the format of news (Tandoc, 2019). However, in public discourse, the meanings of the two notions are obfuscated by how politicians appropriate them to criticize their opponents. Politicians may brand information or opinions unfavorable toward them as fake news, and populist politicians often criticize the news media as purveyors of fake news (Farhall, Carson, Wright, Gibbons, & Lukamto, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). In authoritarian countries, the state may weaponize the fake news label to justify the establishment of laws curtailing freedom of information and expression (Neo, 2022a). Anti-disinformation legislation is often simply called "fake news law" in public discourse. This study addresses the broader phenomenon of disinformation since it is what most state and civil society actions in various countries aim to address. This article thus uses the term disinformation primarily, though it can be kept in mind that the terms "disinformation" and "fake news" are often used interchangeably in the public arena.

Given the status of public discourses surrounding disinformation, ordinary citizens may also define it in various ways. How people define disinformation or fake news can shape their perceptions of the prevalence, seriousness, and origin of the problem. For example, Tong, Gill, Li, Valenzuela, and Rojas (2020) found that when asked to define "fake news," people may provide either a descriptive or politicized definition. People with higher levels of perceived exposure to fake news and higher levels of political interests tend to adopt a politicized definition. Lee (2022) found that people who adopt a broader definition of disinformation—that is, treat a wider range of materials as disinformation—perceive the problem as more

serious and more influential. Van der Linden, Panagopoulos, and Roozenbeek (2020) found that when asked to offer “top-of-mind associations” with the term fake news, conservatives were more likely to associate it with the mainstream media, whereas liberals were more likely to associate it with right-wing media.

Therefore, people’s disinformation perceptions can be developed in response partly to the actual phenomenon of disinformation and partly to the discourses of political actors, and research has repeatedly shown that partisanship shapes disinformation perceptions (Li & Su, 2020; Tsang, 2022). But no matter how disinformation perceptions are formed, they could influence people’s attitudes and behavior. Yang and Horning (2020) showed that the third-person perception of fake news, that is, the perception that fake news has a stronger impact on others than on oneself, leads to lower levels of social media news sharing. Chang (2021) examined whether perceived prevalence of, perceived severity of, and perceived vulnerability to fake news led people to adopt proactive coping strategies, and perceived severity stood out as the variable most consistently related to coping behavior. Studies in several countries have found that perceived influence of disinformation on society related positively to support for anti-disinformation legislation (Cheng, Mitomo, Kamplian, & Seo, 2021; Lee, 2022).

Following the lead of the above studies, this article focuses on perceptions about the severity of the disinformation problem. Conceptually, perceived severity refers to the perception that disinformation has constituted a severe problem with a likely detrimental impact on people and society (Chang, 2021). Empirically, as to be explicated below, the study examines people’s perceptions of the overall seriousness of the problem of disinformation and their perceptions of the influence of disinformation on society. Both variables represent the general idea of perceived severity of the disinformation problem.

Instead of news-sharing behavior or support for anti-disinformation legislation, this study focuses on how disinformation perceptions relate to media trust. Media trust is an important concern because it underlies people’s capability to agree on facts about public matters, which is in turn a prerequisite for meaningful public deliberation (Stromback et al., 2020). Therefore, one reason why disinformation constitutes a serious concern is its possible negative impact on media trust (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

For moral philosophers, a relationship of trust arises when one has to rely on others to do things on his/her behalf. As Baier (1986) stated, trust “is reliance on others’ competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm things one cares about which are entrusted to their care” (p. 259). In modern societies, people rely on various expert systems to help organize everyday life (Giddens, 1990). The news media can be regarded as the expert system helping people navigate the social and political world (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Trusting someone, however, always carries the risks of the negative consequences that could arise if the trustee fails to do the job properly. To trust the news media is to take the risks of being misinformed or uninformed in exchange for the benefits of getting useful information efficiently (Swart & Broersma, 2022). Hanitzsch and colleagues (2018) thus defined trust in the news media as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (p. 5).

It is not difficult to understand why and how the disinformation problem should relate to media trust. On the one hand, low levels of media trust could lead to acceptance of disinformation. When people do not trust the news media, they stop using the news media as the yardstick of truthfulness. Hence, they are more likely to find “alternative facts” credible (Valenzuela, Halpern, & Araneda, 2022; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). On the other hand, when people perceive disinformation to be widespread, they could have a stronger sense of the risks of being misinformed. Hence, they could become less likely to render themselves vulnerable to the news in general. People may also take the proliferation of disinformation as a sign of the news media’s failure to gatekeep properly, and perceived performance of the news media can affect media trust (Culver & Lee, 2019; Piesivac, 2017).

Empirically, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) found that exposure to elite discourse about fake news leads to lower levels of media trust. Hameleers and colleagues (2022) found a relationship between perceived prevalence of misinformation and perceived tendency for the media to lie. Yet the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust is not always robust. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) showed a negative relationship between perceived exposure to fake news and media trust in South Africa, among men in Kenya, but not in Nigeria. Valenzuela and colleagues’ (2022) study in Chile found that perceived credibility of disinformation lowered media trust only between 2017 and 2018, but not between 2018 and 2019. Nevertheless, this study still expects an overall negative relationship between perceived severity of disinformation and media trust:

H1: Media trust is negatively predicted by (a) perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and (b) perceived influence of disinformation on society.

The Moderating Role of Political Trust

Political trust has been defined as “the subjective probability of a citizen believing that the political system, or parts of it, will produce preferred outcomes even if the citizen takes no part in its production” (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995, p. 22). The concept can be understood with the same theoretical considerations explicated above regarding media trust. That is, people have to rely on governmental institutions—including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches—to make laws, implement policies, maintain order and justice, and protect the rights of individuals. The question is to what extent one can entrust the governmental institutions to carry out the tasks. Trust can influence governmental performance because it shapes people’s willingness to support government policies and the tendency to call decisions made by the various branches of the government into question (Hetherington, 2004).

For the present study, the concern is how political trust might shape the relationship between media trust and disinformation perceptions. When people see disinformation as widespread and creating an information chaos, they are more likely to see themselves as vulnerable to disinformation. Although people may handle the problem at the individual level by engaging in fact-checking or content curation (Lee, Chan, Chen, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2019), they need to rely on someone to handle the problem at the societal level. The government is an option. People who trust the government would be more likely to support anti-disinformation legislation (Lee, 2022). For the present study, if people trust the government, disinformation perceptions should impinge on media trust particularly strongly because people would feel that they can

rely on the government to deal with the problem. However, if people distrust the government, they may need to entrust the news media to clean up the information chaos after all. Hence the negative impact of disinformation perceptions on media trust could be weaker. Overall, the negative relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust should be stronger among people with higher levels of political trust. That is, we can expect a negative interaction effect between political trust and disinformation perceptions on media trust.

Notably, the same interaction effect can be derived through another argument. Media and political trust tend to relate to each other positively (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). However, the media and the government are distinctive institutions with different functions and norms. Hence, the relationship between media and political trust can vary according to how people understand the relationship between the media and the political system. For instance, Ariely (2015) found that among European countries, the positive relationship between media and political trust is weaker in countries with higher degrees of media autonomy and professionalism. Similarly, Lee, Chan, and So (2005) found that the evaluations of media and government institutions are positively related only among less educated people in Hong Kong. The two are unrelated among educated people, who understand the normative roles of the press better.

For this study, disinformation perceptions may be seen as another moderator of the relationship between political trust and media trust. When people perceive disinformation as prevalent and start considering the roles and responsibilities of various institutions, the distinction between the media and governmental institutions is likely to come to mind. Trusting the media and trusting the government will become less closely connected. In other words, disinformation perceptions will weaken the positive relationship between political and media trust. The empirical manifestation is also a negative interaction effect between political trust and perceived severity of disinformation on media trust.

The above paragraphs thus explicate two lines of argument that converge to expect the same interaction effect. Given the main concern of this article, the second hypothesis is phrased by treating political trust as the moderator:

H2: (a) Perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and (b) perceived influence of disinformation on society relate more strongly negatively to media trust among people with higher levels of political trust.

The Role of Political Values

Political scientists have long been concerned with how ordinary people make sense of the complex political world. A body of literature has focused on the role of political values, defined as the normative principles and belief assumptions about government, citizenship, and society (McCann, 1997). These values are prescriptive, abstract, and applicable across situations (Goren, 2005). For individuals, political values can be tied to basic personal values (Schwartz et al., 2014). Political values are formed through childhood socialization and remain relatively stable in life (Feldman, 1988) though they can still be subjected to short-term influences (Connors, 2020; Vecchione, Caprara, Dentale, & Schwartz, 2013). Political values "facilitate position taking in more concrete domains by serving as general focal points in

an otherwise confusing political environment” (McCann, 1997, p. 565). They thus systematically shape people’s issue opinions, partisanship, and vote choice (Evans & Neundorf, 2020; Goren, Schoen, Reifler, Scotto, & Chittick, 2016).

This study posits that how people react to the problem of disinformation is grounded in their normative beliefs about government and society. Given the presence of a social problem, people see certain solutions as more or less desirable based on whether those solutions are consistent with their normative beliefs about politics. Hence, facing the disinformation problem, people may adjust their attitudes toward specific actors and support specific policy responses depending on political values. This leads to the expectation that political values will moderate the relationship between disinformation perceptions and specific outcome variables, that is, media trust in the present case.

Political scientists share no consensus on which set of political values should be seen as the most fundamental to people’s political outlook. However, in a comparative analysis of 15 countries, Schwartz and colleagues (2014) identified six political values as having appeared regularly in the literature: Moral traditionalism, blind patriotism, equality, civil liberties, law and order, and free enterprise. This study focuses on two of them—law and order and civil liberties—because of their relevance to the issue at hand.

Law and order, as a political value, refers to a belief in the need for the government to forbid disruptive activities and enforce the law, whereas to value civil liberties means to value the right of people to act and think in the way they consider most appropriate (Jacoby, 2006). They are highly pertinent to the issue here because debates about the proper way to handle the problem of disinformation, especially debates about the desirability of legislation, often involve the tension between effective maintenance of the information order and protection of freedom of expression (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021).

Specifically, the negative relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust is likely to be stronger when people treat law and order as important. Belief in law and order is distinctive from political trust: The former refers to a normative belief in the preferability of a certain way to govern a society, whereas the latter refers to a willingness to rely on the current government to rule. Nevertheless, similar to political trust, citizens who value law and order may be more likely to entrust the government to clean up the information chaos, and they may be more prone to see the news media as part of the disinformation problem.

Meanwhile, the negative relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust may be attenuated if people believe in civil liberties strongly. If people regard civil liberties as highly important, they may see the free flow of information and the presence of an autonomous media system independent from political influence as important to society. Therefore, when the problem of disinformation arises, instead of supporting governmental intervention, they may be more likely to entrust civil society actors, including the professional news media, with handling the problem of disinformation. Hence, the proliferation of disinformation is less likely to lead to distrust of the news media among people who value civil liberties.

Based on the above arguments, the following hypotheses are presented:

- H3: The negative relationships between media trust and (a) perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and (b) perceived influence of disinformation on society are stronger among people who value law and order to larger extents.*
- H4: The negative relationships between media trust and (a) perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and (b) perceived influence of disinformation on society are weaker among people who value civil liberties to larger extents.*

Context, Method, and Data

Context

The present study was conducted in Hong Kong, where fake news and disinformation have aroused widespread concerns amidst the protest movement in 2019 (Lee, 2020) and the subsequent COVID-19 outbreak (Liu & Huang, 2020). The (perceived) proliferation of disinformation led to heightened interest in the practice of fact-checking (Feng, Tsang, & Lee, 2021). Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government expressed its concerns about the problem and started to study the possibility of establishing “fake news law.” Not unlike other countries, the idea aroused debates. Critics worried that anti-disinformation legislation was only a means for the government to suppress dissent (Leung & Cheng, 2021).

Hong Kong government officials mainly employed the notion of “fake news” in their speeches, and the notion of “fake news law” is often used in public discourses. There have been fears concerning whether the government would use a fake news law to crack down on the media (Kihara, 2021). The Legislative Council engaged in an analysis of measures to tackle online disinformation in general (Legislative Council of the Hong Kong SAR, 2019). The Hong Kong government also announced that it would study relevant laws in other countries—and laws in other countries typically cover disinformation in general. In Singapore, for example, the relevant law—the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act—covers online disinformation though the media continue to use the term “fake news law” to refer to it (e.g., Chee, 2021). The situation is likely to be similar in Hong Kong: Fake news is the term most frequently used in the public arena because of its intuitive appeal, but if the government does put forward legislation, the law is likely to cover disinformation in general. Nonetheless, as of early 2024, the Hong Kong government has yet to actually put forward any proposal for legislation.

In any case, given the public debates and the possibility of disinformation legislation, Hong Kong is a suitable place to study the implications of disinformation perceptions. A previous study has shown that political values, political trust, and perceived severity of the disinformation problem all relate significantly to support for anti-disinformation legislation (Lee, 2022). The present study is interested in how disinformation perceptions relate to media trust, with political trust and political values as possible moderators.

Sampling

The data analyzed came from a telephone survey conducted by the Center for Communication and Public Opinion Survey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2021. The target population was Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 years or above. Probability sampling was adopted. Specifically, to create the sampling frame, all four-digit landline and mobile number prefixes currently in use were collected. The full set of 10,000 four-digit suffixes (i.e., 0000–9999) were combined with the prefixes to generate a database of all possible phone numbers in use. Specific numbers were randomly selected from the database by computer during the fieldwork. For landline numbers, the most recent birthday method was used to select the target respondent from a household. For mobile numbers, the person taking the call was the target respondent.

A total of 1,014 interviews were completed. Half of the interviewees were reached via mobile numbers, and the other half were reached via landline numbers. The response rate was 36% according to the American Association of Public Opinion Research response rate formula 3.¹ About 51.7% of the respondents were females. About 19.0% were between 18 and 29 years of age, 23.6% were 60 years old or older, and 45.0% had a tertiary degree. In comparison, 52.9% of the people in the population were females. About 15.4% were between 18 and 29 years of age, 32.0% were 60 years old or older, and 29.6% had a tertiary degree. Typical of public affairs surveys in Hong Kong, young and educated people were oversampled. The sample was weighted according to the age × gender × education distribution of the population—following census data—when conducting the analysis.

Operationalization of Key Variables

Media and Political Trust

The survey asked the respondents to report, using a 0–10 scale (0 = absolutely distrust, 10 = absolutely trust), the extent to which they trusted (1) the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, (2) the Chinese central government, (3) the judiciary system in Hong Kong, and (4) the news media in Hong Kong. The last item—which specifies that the object of trust is the news media—represents media trust ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 2.18$). This is the key dependent variable for the present study. *Political trust* is the average of the first three items ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 3.18$, $SD = 2.74$). It is the moderating variable for H2. Media trust and political trust are significantly positively, but only weakly, correlated at the bivariate level ($r = .08$, $p < .01$).

¹ The response rate is typical of opinion surveys in Hong Kong. Recent political changes after the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) had led to concerns about selective nonparticipation and preference falsification in political surveys. While Kobayashi and Chan (2022) reported the presence of selective nonparticipation and preference falsification in a survey conducted in post-NSL Hong Kong, the problem is not extreme. The current study does not involve highly politically sensitive questions, and it focuses on relationships among variables. A small degree of preference falsification and selective nonparticipation, even if present, should not undermine the validity of the conclusion.

Perceived Severity of Disinformation

To measure the main independent variable in the study, the respondents were asked if they saw fake news as a serious problem in Hong Kong. Answers were registered by a 4-point scale (1 = not at all, 4 = very serious; $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.83$). The item represents *perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem*. Respondents were then asked to indicate, with a 5-point scale (1 = completely no influence, 5 = very large influence), whether "disinformation that circulates in the society and via the media" had an influence on (1) themselves, (2) their family, (3) Hong Kong citizens, and (4) Hong Kong society. The first two items were averaged for *perceived influence of disinformation on self* ($r = .56$, $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.04$), which served as a control. The next two items were averaged for *perceived influence of disinformation on society* ($r = .72$, $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.03$). Both perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and perceived influence on society represent the concept of perceived severity. The two were positively correlated at $r = .54$ ($p < .001$), but they were used separately partly because they employed different measurement scales.

Political Values

To measure the two political values that were posited as moderators in H3 and H4, this study adopted the statements used by Schwartz and colleagues (2014), but with the wording adjusted to suit the Hong Kong context. *Belief in law and order* was the average of respondents' agreement, registered with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), with the following statements: (1) the government should have the power to ban marches and rallies that might turn into violent conflicts, and (2) government departments should have more power to better maintain public safety ($r = .69$, $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.26$). *Belief in civil liberties* was the average of respondents' agreement, expressed with the same scale, with the following statements: (1) protecting citizens' freedom is very important to Hong Kong society, and (2) everyone should have the freedom to accept and express views that might not be found agreeable in society ($r = .42$, $M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.87$). The two values were negatively correlated ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$). People who saw law and order as important tended to emphasize civil liberties less.

Control variables included four demographics (age, sex, education, and family income), mainstream news exposure (average of newspaper and TV news exposure, each measured with a 6-point scale), news consumption via social media (average of two relevant items), exposure to online alternative media (average of exposure to two alternative media outlets), exposure to online pro-government media (average of exposure to two online pro-government outlets), internal efficacy (agreement with a 5-point Likert-scaled statement), political leanings (two dummy variables representing self-identified supporters of the democrats and self-identified supporters of the pro-government faction, respectively, derived from the same question on whether the respondents leaned toward a certain political faction), and the aforementioned perceived influence of fake news on self. Further details of the operationalization of the control variables were omitted due to space constraints and are available on request.

Analysis and Findings

Predicting Media Trust

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of media trust. The variables included all the controls, the two political values, political trust, and fake news perceptions. As the first column of Table 1 shows, females and people with lower levels of income exhibited higher levels of media trust. Both news consumption via social media and consumption of online alternative media predicted media trust positively. Pro-democracy citizens and people who valued civil liberties also trusted the media more.

Table 1. Predicting Media Trust.

	Models			
	1	2	3	4
Sex	.17***	.18***	.17***	.18***
Age	.03	.05	.04	.05
Education	-.03	-.02	-.02	-.01
Income	-.13***	-.13***	-.14***	-.13***
Mainstream news exposure	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03
News via social media	.09*	.09*	.09*	.09*
Online alternative media	.11*	.11*	.11*	.11*
Online pro-gov. media	.04	.04	.04	.04
Internal efficacy	.04	.04	.04	.04
Pro-democracy	.11**	.11**	.12**	.11**
Pro-government	-.08*	-.07*	-.06	-.07*
Value: Civil liberties	.12***	.12***	.12***	.12***
Value: Law and order	-.05	-.03	-.03	-.03
Political trust	.36***	.36***	.37***	.37***
Disinformation (DI) perceptions				
Influence on self	.00	-.01	-.00	-.01
Influence on society	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*	-.09*
Seriousness	-.19***	-.18***	-.20***	-.18***
Political trust ×				
DI's influence on self		-.00	-.04	.00
DI's influence on society		-.13***		-.12**
DI seriousness			-.08*	-.03
Adjusted R ²	0.164***	0.178***	0.171***	0.178***

Notes. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Missing values were deleted listwise (except for family income, which was replaced by mean). N = 926. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Meanwhile, although media and political trust were only weakly correlated at the bivariate level, political trust was strongly positively related to media trust in the multivariate analysis. Most importantly, supporting H1a and H1b, both perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and perceived influence of disinformation on society were negatively related to media trust. Notably, perceived influence of disinformation on self was not related to media trust. People were less likely to render themselves vulnerable to the news mainly when they perceived the negative *social* consequences of disinformation.

Hypothesis 2 predicts political trust to moderate the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust. The hypothesis was tested by including interaction terms in the model. Three interaction terms were created, that is, the interaction between political trust and all three disinformation perceptions, with the interaction between political trust and perceived influence of disinformation on self serving as a control. The interaction terms were centered around means to alleviate multicollinearity. Nevertheless, since the interaction terms still shared the same component, three models were tested. The second column of Table 1 shows that when political trust \times perceived influence on self and political trust \times perceived influence on society were added, only the latter obtained a significant negative coefficient. The third column shows that when political trust \times perceived influence on self and political trust \times perceived seriousness were added, again, only the latter obtained a significant negative coefficient. When all three were included, only political trust \times perceived influence on society had a significant coefficient, meaning that this interaction effect was more robust than the interaction between political trust and perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem.

The negative coefficient means that the overall negative relationship between the perception variable and media trust would become even more negative (i.e., stronger) when political trust was high. This is consistent with the hypothesis. Using PROCESS MACRO, it was observed that the effect of perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem on media trust would be nominally negative at all levels of political trust. Figure 1a shows the interaction effect in graphical form. The negative effect of perceived seriousness was statistically significant when political trust was higher than 0.57 (78.8% of the respondents met this condition), and the effect was increasingly negative as political trust rose.

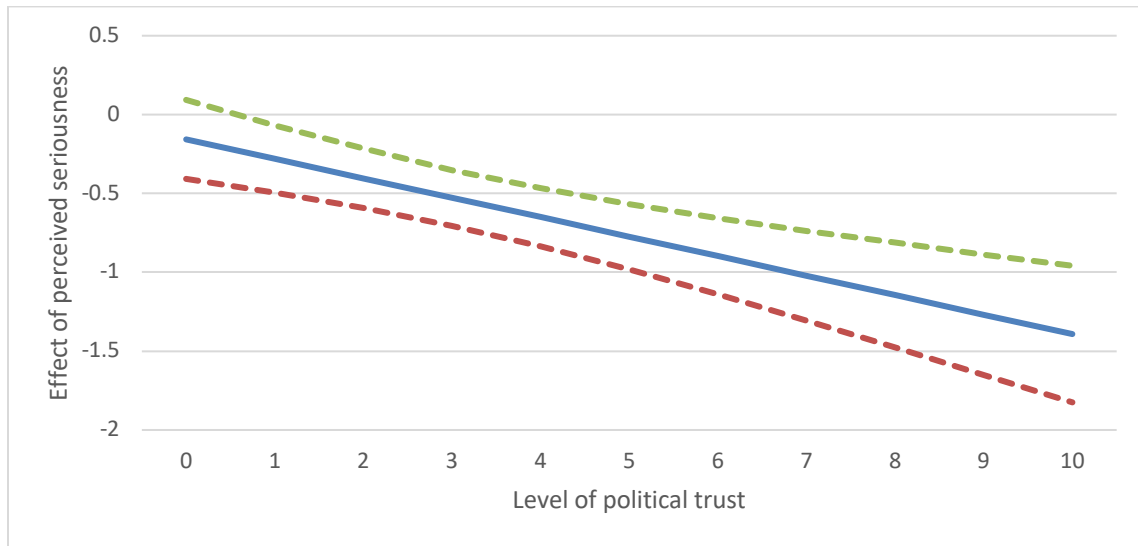


Figure 1a. Effects of perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem by levels of political trust.

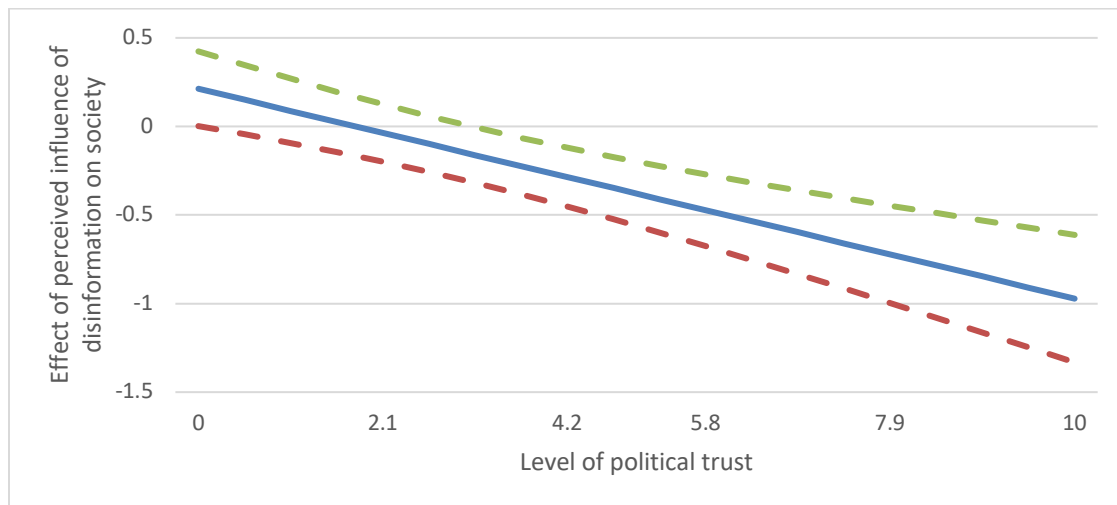


Figure 1b. Effects of perceived influence of disinformation on society by levels of political trust.

Following the same procedure, the effect of perceived influence of disinformation on society on media trust was significantly negative for people whose scores on political trust were higher than 3.12 (45.8% of the respondents met this condition) (Figure 1b). Interestingly, the effect of perceived influence of disinformation on society on media trust was significant and positive for people whose scores

on political trust were 0 (18.2% of the respondents²). Nonetheless, the general pattern is that the impact of perceived influence of disinformation on society would become more and more negative as political trust increased.

The Moderating Role of Political Values

We then examined how political values moderated the relationship between fake news perceptions and media trust. Similar to Table 1, the hypotheses were tested by adding the interaction terms—one by one first, and then simultaneously—into the model. As Table 2 shows, all four interaction terms between the political values and the core disinformation perceptions obtained a significant coefficient when added individually. The signs of the coefficients were consistent with expectations. The negative relationships between both disinformation perception variables and media trust were weaker among people who valued civil liberties more. The relationships between the disinformation perception variables and media trust were stronger among people who valued law and order more. When entered simultaneously, two interaction terms retained their significant coefficients: Belief in civil liberties × perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and belief in law and order × perceived influence of disinformation on society.

Table 2. The Moderating Role of Political Values.

	Model				
	1	2	3	4	5
Interaction					
Value: Civil liberties × disinformation influence	.10**				.01
Value: Civil liberties × disinformation seriousness		.13***			.11**
Value: Law and order × disinformation influence			-.13***		-.11**
Value: Law and order × disinformation seriousness				-.08**	-.01
Adjusted R ²	.171***	.180***	.178***	.169***	.189***

Notes. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. The model contains all the main effect terms and the controls in Table 1. Missing values were deleted listwise (except for family income, which was replaced by mean). N = 926. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 2 supports both H3 and H4. An analysis using PROCESS MACRO showed that perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem had a significant negative relationship with media trust for people at all levels of belief in civil liberties. However, as shown in Figure 2a, the negative effect decreased in strength for people who valued civil liberties to larger extents. Meanwhile, perceived

² The survey registered strong political distrust as it was conducted only months after the end of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests and the enactment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong.

seriousness of the disinformation problem had a significant negative impact on media trust for people whose scores were higher than 1.55 on belief in law and order (78.3% of the respondents met this condition). As Figure 2b illustrates, the negative effect increased in strength for people who valued law and order to larger extents.

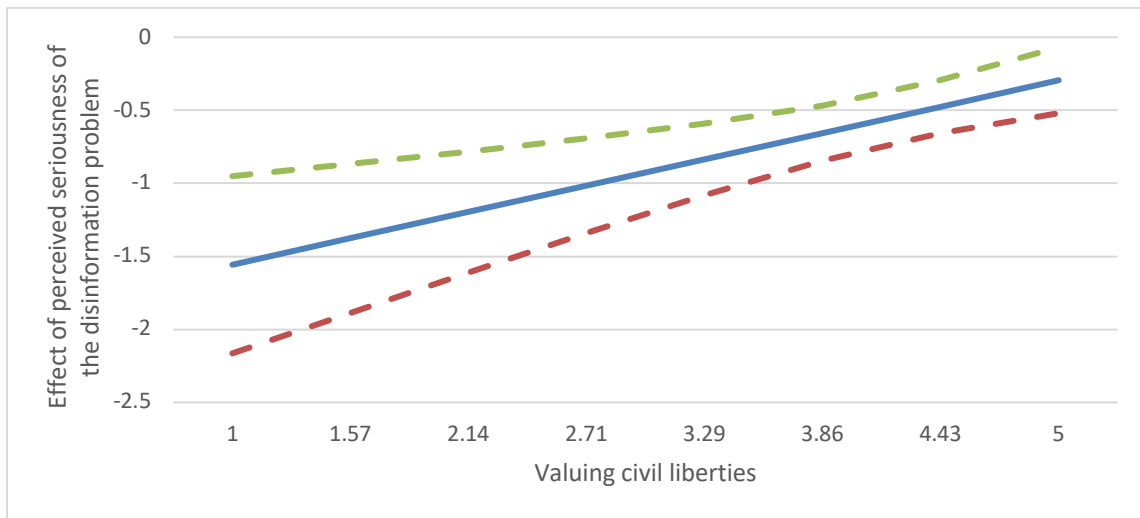


Figure 2a. Effects of perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem by belief in civil liberties.

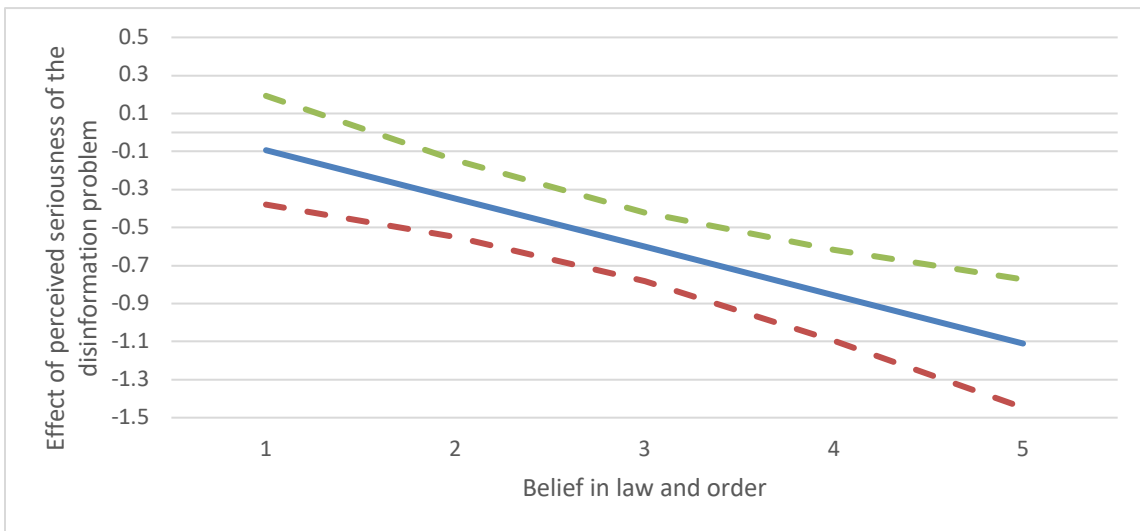


Figure 2b. Effects of perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem by belief in law and order.

Meanwhile, perceived influence of disinformation on society had a negative effect on media distrust for people at all levels of belief in civil liberties, but the effect became less negative when belief in civil

liberties was stronger (see Figure 3a). The negative effect became statistically insignificant for people who scored higher than 4.19 on belief in civil liberties (51.6% of the respondents met this condition, i.e., the negative effect of perceived influence of disinformation on society was significant among the other 48.4% of the respondents when belief in civil liberties was used as the moderator).

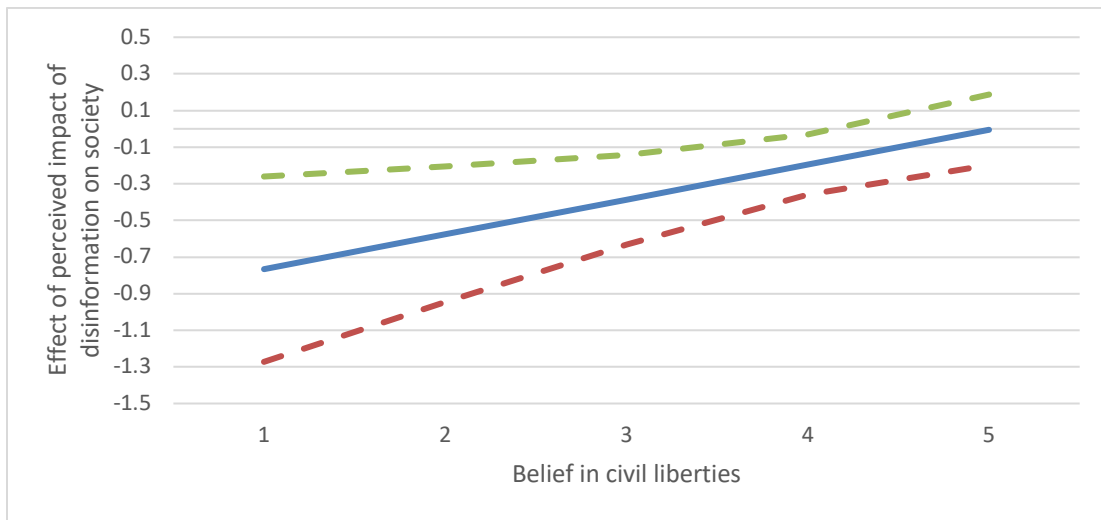


Figure 3a. Effects of perceived influence of disinformation on society by belief in civil liberties.

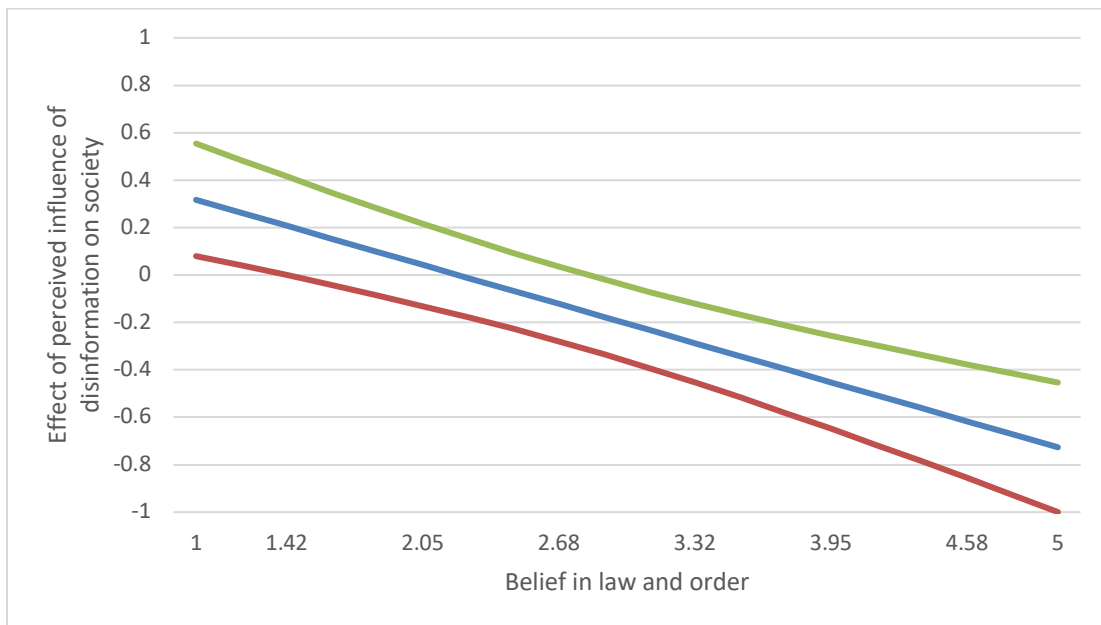


Figure 3b. Effects of perceived influence of disinformation on society by belief in law and order.

Lastly, as Figure 3b illustrates, the impact of perceived influence of disinformation on society can be positive or negative depending on belief in law and order. Among people whose scores on belief in law and order were below 1.42, the impact of perceived influence of disinformation on society on media trust was significantly positive (13.1% of the respondents met this condition). But among people whose scores on belief in law and order were above 2.82, the impact of perceived influence of disinformation on society on media trust was significantly negative (51.9% of the respondents met this condition). The impact of the variable was even more negative when belief in law and order became even stronger.

Concluding Discussion

This article is interested in extending recent analyses of the implications of the disinformation and fake news phenomenon on media trust. The first important finding is the negative relationship between media trust and perceived severity of the problem of disinformation. Although the relationship seems intuitive, a closer look at the recent literature shows that not all studies produced robust evidence for the relationship (Valenzuela et al., 2022; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Discovering a consistently negative relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust cannot be taken for granted.

When the present study's findings are considered together with the recent literature, two points are worth noting. First, the independent variable(s) used in various studies differed. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) dealt with perceived fake news exposure. Valenzuela and colleagues (2022) examined perceived credibility of misinformation. This study examines perceived severity of the problem of disinformation, measured in terms of overall seriousness and perceived influence on society. It is probable that mere exposure to fake news and disinformation might not have a strong impact on media trust because not all people exposed to disinformation would find disinformation equally problematic. The concept of trust is tied to the ideas of risks and vulnerability. If people do not see disinformation as a serious problem with a strong negative impact, their sense of risk could remain unaffected. In fact, the idea that perceived severity is more likely to influence people's attitudes and behavior is consistent with studies that examined the impact of disinformation perceptions on other variables, such as support for government intervention (Chang, 2021).

Second, this study illustrates that the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust is shaped by other factors, including political trust and political values. This study confirms the power of political values in giving orientation to people and structuring their issue attitudes (Feldman, 1988; McCann, 1997). Among people who put little emphasis on civil liberties, both perceived seriousness of the disinformation problem and perceived influence of disinformation on society had a strong negative relationship with media trust. However, among people who put a strong emphasis on civil liberties, only perceived seriousness had a significant negative relationship with media trust, and the relationship was weakened substantially. Similarly, disinformation perceptions had strong negative relationships with media trust for people who valued law and order highly. But perceived seriousness related much more weakly to media trust for people who did not value law and order. Perceived influence of disinformation on society even related to media trust positively for people who strongly rejected the value of law and order.

Although the last finding was applicable only to a small group of respondents, it is conceptually revealing. People who put the least emphasis on law and order are likely to be those most worried about the coercive power of the state. They are likely to be wary of the state's attempt to weaponize the notion of fake news (Neo, 2022a, 2022b). For these people, when disinformation becomes a serious matter, it can be even more important for civil society actors and the professional media to be entrusted with handling the problem.

In addition, this study shows that political trust could moderate the negative relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust. As explicated earlier in the article, there are two ways to understand this interaction effect. First, when people are generally willing to rely on the government to address social problems, they should be more willing to entrust the government to clean up the information chaos. Disinformation perceptions, in this scenario, can induce people to stop being willing to render themselves vulnerable to news media performance. But when people become unwilling to trust the government, the negative implication of disinformation perceptions on media trust could be mitigated by a perceived need to rely on the news media to handle the problem after all.

Second, the same interaction effect may be understood as a result of disinformation perceptions weakening the linkage between media and political trust. An overall positive relationship between media and political trust is a well-established phenomenon (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Yet previous studies have also shown that the linkage between media and political trust can be shaped by the degree to which the media system is professional and autonomous from the state (Ariely, 2015) or the degree to which citizens understand the normative role of the news media and thus the distinction between the media and political institutions (Lee et al., 2005). This study suggests that problematic phenomena such as disinformation may prime people to consider the media and political institutions as distinctive, hence weakening the relationship between media and political trust. A broader implication is that disinformation can not only shape people's attitudes toward specific institutions but also reconfigure their understanding of the relationships among institutions.

In summary, while perceived severity of disinformation tends to relate to media trust negatively, the relationship between the two is not always strong and can be shaped by other factors. Fake news and disinformation can be seen as political stimuli people encounter in their environment. How people react to such stimuli depends on the factors that orientate people in the complex political world. Paying attention to this conceptual principle should help us better specify and understand how disinformation matters.

This study was conducted in Hong Kong, where the government had expressed the intention to consider disinformation legislation in 2021. A note about contextual and practical implications can be added. Although this study does not examine people's support for disinformation legislation directly, the finding suggests that public opinion toward any proposed "fake news law" may be shaped by a complex amalgam of factors incorporating people's perceptions of the severity of the problem, political trust, trust in the news media, and value orientations. People who saw the problem of disinformation as more serious were shown to be more supportive of legislation (Lee, 2022). However, the current analysis shows that perceived severity of the disinformation problem actually led to *higher levels* of trust in the news media among people with the lowest levels of political trust and weak beliefs in law and order. Hence, even if people recognize the problem of disinformation as serious, they do not necessarily prefer the state to address the problem

through legislation.³ For actors who value civil liberties, strengthening the capability of civil society to handle the problem of disinformation would be the preferred approach.

A few limitations and future research directions should be noted. First, this study does not ascertain whether disinformation perceptions have caused changes in media trust. If we focus only on the bivariate relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust, it is plausible to argue that whether people trust the news media could influence their perceptions of the severity of the disinformation problem. However, this study also examines how political values and political trust moderate the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust. The arguments supporting the interaction-effect hypotheses largely treat disinformation perceptions as the cause. Nonetheless, it remains the task for future research to address the issue of causality in the relationship between disinformation perceptions and media trust.

Second, scholars on media trust have noted that the concept may be differentiated according to the trustees involved (Stromback et al., 2020). In addition to general media trust, people can have higher or lower levels of trust toward specific outlets, journalists, and types of content, among others. While perceived severity of the disinformation problem may undermine trust in the media in general, disinformation perceptions may lead people to trust specific outlets. Put in more general terms, disinformation perceptions may configure people's trust in different types of media and content. This could be another direction for future research.

Third, this study treats the values of civil liberties and law and order as separate independent variables. However, political scientists have noted that the core political values are supposed to be related to each other in specific ways, and people can experience value conflicts or ambivalence to different extents (Jacoby, 2006; Peffley, Knigge, & Hurwitz, 2001). In the present study, the values of law and order and civil liberties are indeed negatively correlated. Yet some individuals may value both, resulting in value ambivalence. Some people may not value either of them, resulting in value indifference. There is room for further analysis of how political values may interact with each other in shaping people's responses to disinformation.

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³ Interestingly, in mid-2023, the chief executive of the Hong Kong government, John Lee said in a media interview that if the problem of disinformation can be contained through self-regulation by the media sector, then legislation is unnecessary (Chau, 2023). That is, the government leader also expressed the view that the need for legislation was tied to whether the news media could be entrusted with addressing the problem.

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