Assessing news credibility through cues: How young adults navigate trust in journalism on Instagram

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Abstract

This thesis explores how international master's students in Denmark aged 20 to 30 assess the credibility of news encountered on Instagram through different cues. It further examines how these cue-based credibility assessments relate to participants' trust in journalism on the platform.

To better understand this topic, the study was situated within existing research. The existing research focused on topics such as social media news, young audiences, platformized news, and news credibility and trust (Swart & Broersma, 2024; Hase et al., 2023; Gehrke et al., 2023). To support the study, three theoretical frameworks were used: the MAIN model (Sundar, 2008), the multidimensional model of trust in news media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), and the social media logic framework (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how credibility judgments are shaped by both cues surrounding platform-based news and the broader platform environment in which news is encountered, and how these judgments relate to participants' trust in journalism as it appears on Instagram.

The study followed a qualitative research design and collected data through ten semi-structured interviews with international master's students living in Denmark. The interviews also included a short Instagram scrolling task, which allowed participants to reflect on concrete news examples encountered on the platform. The empirical material was then analyzed through data-driven coding and reflexive thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2018, p. 61; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 4-5).

Moreover, a reflexive thematic analysis revealed that participants' credibility assessments on Instagram were shaped by several cues. These included source and account recognition, visual presentation, engagement signals, and verification markers. However, these cues were not treated as fixed indicators. Instead, participants interpreted them in relation to their own platform and news consumption habits, as well as Instagram's mixed-content environment. The findings, therefore, showed that trust in news on Instagram was shaped by specific conditions. They often valued Instagram as a place where they came across news, but trust in journalism on the platform depended on whether the content could be connected to recognized journalistic sources and checked against other sources.

Overall, the thesis contributes to research on news credibility, trust in journalism, and social media news use among young adults. It does so by showing how international master's students in Denmark aged 20-30 assess credibility and navigate trust when encountering news on

Instagram. The study also shows how credibility judgments are shaped by platform-specific cues, verification practices, and participants' existing perceptions of journalism.

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1. Introduction

As social media platforms became popular channels for accessing news, news organizations needed to adapt how they select, format, and distribute journalistic content beyond their own websites and across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X/Twitter (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1499-1503). A related development is what Hendrickx (2023) describes as "social journalism," which is a form of journalism created specifically for social media platforms rather than for news organizations' own channels (pp. 1810-1811). Together, these studies suggest that social media platforms are not only distribution channels for news, but also spaces where journalistic content is adapted or created for platform environments (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1501-1503; Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1810-1811).

Instagram belongs to one of these social media platforms where news is encountered alongside mixed content that combines entertainment, influencer content, advertising, personal updates, and other forms of communication (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1622). Because news appears within this mixed-content environment, encounters with news are often integrated into everyday scrolling practices rather than only resulting from direct news-seeking (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5743-5744). This is important because Instagram brings different sources and genres together into one information stream, making it complex to distinguish news from other kinds of information (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1622).

In this context, credibility becomes relevant. This is also important for platform-adapted news, where information is presented in condensed, platform-specific formats, such as segmented posts (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1818-1820). Therefore, assessing credibility on Instagram may involve more than evaluating the information itself; it may also involve interpreting surrounding cues, as young adults have been shown to use heuristic judgments when assessing news on social media (Gehrke et al., 2025, pp. 1503-1504).

Young adults offer a relevant perspective on Instagram news because their news encounters are often connected to everyday social media use rather than deliberate news-seeking (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1622; Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5737-5739). This thesis focuses specifically on international master's students in Denmark, as they represent a group of young adult users who encounter news in digital and platform-based environments while also navigating different cultural and media contexts. This makes them a relevant group for exploring how credibility assessments are formed when news is encountered on Instagram.

Taken together, existing studies have examined related aspects of this master thesis topic, such as Instagram news encounters, social journalism, young adults' social media use, and the credibility of platform-based news (Swart & Broersma, 2024; Hendrickx, 2023, 2025; Gehrke et al., 2025). However, less is known about how these aspects come together among international master's students in Denmark and how their assessments of platform-based Instagram news relate to trust in journalism on the platform. With this in mind, the following problem formulation is introduced:

"How do international master's students in Denmark assess the credibility of news encountered on Instagram, which cues do they rely on, and how do these assessments relate to their trust in journalism on the platform?"

To address this problem formulation, the thesis examines how these young adults, aged 20-30, evaluate the credibility of news encountered on Instagram as part of their everyday platform use, and how these evaluations relate to their trust in journalism on the platform. In this study, this type of news is referred to as platform-based news, meaning journalistic content that is encountered within a social media platform environment and shaped for specific platform formats and visual presentation (Hase et al., 2023; Hendrickx, 2023; Swart & Broersma, 2024).

Furthermore, credibility and trust in this study are treated as related but distinct concepts. This follows van Dalen's (2020) discussion of the two concepts in journalism studies, where credibility is presented as more narrowly connected to specific information, messages, or sources, while trust is discussed as a broader expectation toward the press and news media over time (pp. 2-4). This distinction is further developed through the theories chosen for this project. Sundar's MAIN model is used to understand how participants' credibility judgments of platform-based news are shaped by cues, shortcuts, and heuristics in digital media environments (Sundar, 2008, pp. 73-79). Trust, in contrast, refers to a broader orientation toward journalism and news sources and is understood through Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust in news media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240). Since these assessments take place on Instagram, van Dijck and Poell's concept of social media logic is used to understand how the platform environment shapes the conditions under which news is encountered and evaluated (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 2-5). By examining how this participant group evaluates platform-

based news on Instagram, this thesis explores how assessments of credibility may relate to trust in journalism on the platform.

2. Literature review

This literature review section looks into existing research on journalism in the digital era, with a focus on digital and platform-based journalism, credibility and trust in social media news, and young audiences news habits. It starts by discussing the current state of digital and platform-based journalism, with a look into platform-based news formats. Then it looks into research on how credibility and trust are shaped in social media environments, before looking at how young audiences encounter and experience news on social media. These perspectives help create a foundation for understanding the relevance of this study and how it contributes to existing research on Instagram news, credibility assessment, and trust in journalism.

2.1 Journalism in social media environments: Platform-based news

This section focuses on digital and platform-based news, especially how news is adapted and created for social media platforms. It reviews studies from Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow (2023), who examine how news outlets adapt content across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (pp. 1499-1503), followed by Hendrickx (2023), who explores journalism produced specifically for a youth-oriented Instagram news account (pp. 1810-1812). Together, these studies help show how journalism is shaped when it is created for platform environments.

Hase et al. (2023) examine how German news outlets adapt their content across social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (pp. 1499-1500). The purpose of the study is to assess whether platformization can be observed in the ways news is selected and reshaped for different social media environments (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1499-1500). The dataset for this study included 4,412 website articles and social media posts, together with 6,850 related images and videos, taken from four major German news outlets: Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Tagesschau, and ZDF Heute (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1499-1500). By comparing website-based journalism with its social media versions, the authors assess how far news content is adapted to platform-specific conditions.

A central concept of this study is platformization, which the authors understand as a process in which news outlets select, adapt, and distribute content according to platform logics rather than according to traditional mass media logics (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1500-1501). In this context, platform logics are connected to platform-specific capabilities such as algorithmic

curation, hypertextuality, interactivity, and visuality, where all influence how journalism can be presented and circulated (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1500-1501).

An important contribution of the study is that social media should not be treated as a homogeneous category (Hase et al., 2023, p. 1501). Hase et al. (2023) say that previous research has often produced inconsistent findings because it has grouped all social media platforms together, despite the fact that platforms differ in their capabilities and communicative norms (p. 1501). For that reason, the authors recognize the platform's individual logic. In their analysis, Facebook is associated with “engaging news,” Instagram and TikTok with “brand-building news,” and Twitter with “continuous, breaking news” (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1501-1503). Facebook offers relatively strong interactivity and hypertextuality, while Instagram and TikTok are more visual and less hypertextual, which supports the circulation of visually centered content that can be consumed on-platform and that often supports the visibility of the news brand rather than directing users to longer articles on publishers' own websites (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1502-1503).

A core aspect of the study design is that it focuses mainly on how news websites are selected and adapted for social media rather than just looking at content natively produced for platforms. The authors in their project note that native content did appear in the sample and that it was more common for platforms like Instagram and TikTok than on Facebook or Twitter (Hase et al., 2023, p. 1507). This difference between adapted and native content is important because it shows that platformization can involve both the repackaging of existing journalism and the creation of more platform-specific forms of news.

Furthermore, the findings from this study show that evidence for platformization is present but uneven, and that it appears more strongly on a technical level than on a deeper communicative level (Hase et al., 2023, p. 1499). News outlets do adapt content to platform conditions, as they distribute different amounts of content across platforms, and they adjust linking practices based on platform circumstances (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1503-1505). As their findings show, on Instagram outlets often exclude links, as hypertextuality is much more limited there, while Twitter posts links to the original news website often, which shows that Twitter has stronger link-based and information-oriented logic (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1502-1504).

At the same time, Hase et al. (2023) do not find consistent differences in topic selection, stronger use of engaging language, or greater personalization across platforms in the way

platformization theory might predict (pp. 1511-1514). In several cases, the authors find only limited differences between website and platform versions of the same content, and in some examples, they even observe lower levels of engaging language and personalization in social media posts than in website articles (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1512-1514). This leads the authors to argue that while journalism is adjusted to platform environments, these adjustments are relatively small and do not necessarily count as a full transformation of journalistic content.

In the discussion, Hase et al. therefore conclude that their results provide only weak evidence for platformization at the level of journalistic content, even though some platform-specific differences are evident (Hase et al., 2023, pp. 1514-1515). In this sense, the study shows that social media does not completely change journalism. Instead, it shows that news is adapted to platforms in some ways, but that many traditional journalistic practices stay. (Hase et al., 2023, p. 1514-1515).

In another study, Hendrickx (2023) explores what he names as “social journalism” through an explorative case study of an Instagram news account (pp. 1810-1812). The author describes social journalism as a type of journalism that is “not meant for a news brand’s or media company’s own platforms but rather specifically for consumption through social media platforms” (Hendrickx, 2023, p. 1811). This definition separates platform-native journalism from journalism that is reposted or promoted through social media. And therefore, Hendrickx (2023), in his article, approaches Instagram as a site where journalism can take new forms because it is shaped by how the platform works and how people use it (pp. 1810-1811).

The study's main focus is on the @nws.nws.nws Instagram account run by the public service broadcaster VRT NWS, whose main target audience is young people. The account was created in 2018 in response to concerns that younger people were difficult to reach through traditional news (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1810-1812). Methodologically, the study works with a mixed-methods design, combining semi-structured interviews of people involved in the production of the Instagram account and a quantitative content analysis of all posts published by the account during March and April 2021 (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1810-1811, 1816-1817). In total, the study conducted interviews with 4 employees from VRT NWS and logged 105 posts, which were analyzed in relation to topics, format, tone, and production logic (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1816-1818).

Moreover, one key finding of the study is that social journalism is shaped both by traditional news values and, in this case, as well by user feedback, including comments, direct messages, and recurring discussion topics among followers (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1819-1820). Hendrickx (2023) says that direct audience feedback is more influential in editorial decision-making than more professional news values (pp. 1819-1820). Furthermore, another finding is about the format and presentation of the content. Hendrickx (2023) shows that the account published around 5 posts per day, each containing 3 panels, often combining images and/or videos in a highly visual format (p. 1818). This is an important finding because it shows how platform-native journalism is built around the app's interface and user habits, rather than traditional news forms. The study also finds the journalists involved in the account worked to make news understandable and engaging for young users by selecting stories they believed would be meaningful to them and would fit the platform (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1818-1819).

At the same time, Hendrickx (2023) shows that platform-native journalism does not mean that traditional journalistic concerns disappear (p. 1821). The journalists behind the Instagram account still aimed to maintain journalistic professionalism and the reputation of the public service media brand by providing "high-quality, trustworthy news content" to a young audience (Hendrickx, 2023, p. 1821).

In the discussion, Hendrickx argues that this case reflects a broader shift in which news production and consumption are increasingly integrated into social media platforms themselves (Hendrickx, 2023, pp. 1821-1822). The study suggests that Instagram is not only used to promote journalism, but also works as a space where a specific kind of journalism can develop.

2.2 Credibility and trust in social media news

This literature review section looks at research on the credibility and trustworthiness of news in social media environments. It focuses on how credibility is shaped by where news is encountered, how they are presented, and which shortcuts users rely on when deciding whether news seems reliable. Together, these studies provide context for understanding how users assess the credibility of news in platform-based settings.

Gehrke, Eggers, de Vreese, and Hopmann (2025) conducted a study exploring how young adults in Denmark authenticate news they encounter on social media and how this affects their trust in journalism (pp. 1503-1504). They start from the observation that social media users

are constantly exposed to accurate news, as well as made-up or misrepresented news, making the ability to judge authenticity and trustworthiness important in everyday life (Gehrke et al., 2025, pp. 1503-1504). However, the authors also say that in this environment, people often rely on mental shortcuts that decide what counts as trustworthy news and what counts as noise (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1504).

In the study, the authors worked with Danish citizens, whom they describe as a high-trust society, both in general trust and in trust in journalism, as Denmark scores high on trust in news compared to many other countries (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1504). They also note that major public-service and mainstream outlets in Denmark are highly trusted (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1504).

Methodologically, the study works with a two-stage qualitative design. In the first stage, participants document how they encounter news on social media by taking screenshots over a period of three days. In this stage, they produce 300 news diary entries. In the second stage, the researchers conducted interviews with 20 participants to explore their experiences and perceptions in more depth (Gehrke et al., 2025, pp. 1510-1512). This approach captured both what users actually encounter in everyday platform use and how they interpret those encounters when reflecting on authenticity and trust.

Moreover, the findings show that participants mostly relied on three main cues when deciding whether social media news seemed authentic: reputation, endorsement, and consistency (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1503). Reputation refers to relying on the perceived credibility of a news organization, and it includes recognizable brands and trust in legacy media. Endorsement refers to cues that other people support or validate the content, including reactions, comments, and signals of popularity. Consistency refers to whether the same information appears across several sources and whether details align across headlines and images (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1507). From the first stage of qualitative design, the authors collected an overview of the diary data. This helped them show which types of sources and platforms were most present in participants' everyday news consumption. The dataset of 300 items is dominated by Danish news organizations, with around 80% of items coming from Danish outlets and only a smaller portion coming from international sources (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1513). The study also reports that most items were encountered on Facebook (76.6%), followed by Instagram (9.67%), with other platforms representing smaller shares (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1514).

Another finding is that participants valued the reputation of Danish media more strongly than platform-specific signals such as a blue verification badge. The study suggests that when a known news brand is present, participants often do not complete a two-step authentication process; instead, they stop after an initial internal judgment and rarely proceed to search elsewhere or ask others (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1504).

In their discussion, Gehrke et al. say that authenticity and trust are closely linked in how people interact with news, and young adults often make judgments based on practical shortcuts rather than thorough fact-checking (Gehrke et al., 2025, pp. 1503-1505). They suggest that while strong trust in well-known national news sources might support confidence in established journalism, it could also limit exposure to international outlooks. This is because a more focused news consumption pattern might prevent users from learning about issues in other countries (Gehrke et al., 2025, p. 1503).

In another study, Chen, Song, Xiao & NieChen (2024) examine how audiences perceive the credibility of short-video news compared to other news formats (p. 422). The study is motivated by the rising growth and concerns about the credibility of short-form videos, especially because short videos can be easily edited or manipulated (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 422-423). The authors in their study argue that short videos are high in “media richness” because they combine different types of aspects that makes them engaging such as audio, visuals, and editing techniques, but their richness may raise questions about credibility judgments (Chen et al., 2024, p.423).

The study mainly works with Media Richness Theory, which suggests that media differ in their ability to convey information through cues such as feedback, multiple communication signals, and personalization (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 424-425). With this theory in mind, the authors place news into three levels of media richness: text-only news (low richness), graphic news (medium richness), and short video news (high richness) (Chen et al., 2024, p. 424). Based on earlier findings that heavily packaged news can sometimes lower credibility, they hypothesize that higher media richness, such as short video news, will be evaluated as less credible than text-only and graphic formats (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 424-425).

Methodologically, the authors conduct a 3 × 2 between-subjects experiment testing the effects of media richness (text-only vs. graphic vs. short video) and emotional intensity (high vs. weak) on credibility perceptions (Chen et al., 2024, p. 428). They recruited 215 participants with

an average age of 28 through social media advertisements from a large university in Northwestern China (Chen et al., 2024, p. 428). The authors of this study also built a virtual mobile news platform to create real news consumption conditions and to make the experiment feel more real (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 428-429).

The materials they used to conduct this study consist of 12 news stories. In those news stories, authors controlled multiple factors; for example, they excluded local and political news items, selected stories from two years earlier to reduce prior knowledge, and kept the news source descriptions, publication dates, and times consistent across conditions (Chen et al., 2024, p. 428). Media richness is manipulated by presenting the same story either as plain text, as text with images, or as a short video with user controls for volume and pace (Chen et al., 2024, p. 428). In the study, emotional intensity refers to how strongly a news story is likely to affect or stir emotions. Therefore, the news stories used for this study were grouped as either high ("strong") or low ("weak") emotional intensity based on sentiment scores (Chen et al., 2024, p. 431). Credibility was measured by asking participants to rate whether the story seemed accurate, authentic, and believable (Chen et al., 2024, p. 431).

The results show that media richness has a significant effect on credibility perceptions, while emotional intensity alone does not show a main effect (Chen et al., 2024, p. 432). Specifically, text-only news and graphic news receive the highest credibility ratings, while short video news receives the lowest credibility ratings (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 432-433). The authors also find an interaction effect between media richness and emotional intensity, meaning that the relationship between format and credibility changes depending on whether the content is high or low in emotional intensity (Chen et al., 2024, pp. 433-434). For example, in the text-only condition, high-emotion stories are judged as more credible than low-emotion ones, while for graphic news and short video news, low-emotion stories tend to be judged as more credible (Chen et al., 2024, p. 434).

In the discussion, Chen et al. mention several reasons why short video news may be seen as less credible than less rich formats. First, they say that video formats may weaken perceptions of seriousness and professionalism, especially in environments where entertainment-oriented short video content is growing (Chen et al., 2024, p. 435). Second, they propose that the combination of multiple cues in short videos can increase cognitive load, making it harder for

audiences to focus on key information and evaluate the content critically (Chen et al., 2024, p.435).

In a study from Karlsen and Aalberg (2023), the authors look into how the distribution of news through social media affects news story credibility (p. 144). They specifically look into whether a news story appears less credible when encountered on Facebook compared to when encountered on the original news website (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 144-145). They place this study in the context of changing news consumption, saying that news is increasingly "diffused and consumed in digital networks" such as social media platforms. And that scholarship still has a limited understanding of how these digital networks influence how audiences perceive the credibility of news (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp.144-145).

Karlsen and Aalberg, in their study, build on existing credibility research that distinguishes between message credibility, source credibility, and media credibility (pp. 146–147). However, the authors argue that social media distribution of news introduces additional layers that need to be considered (Karlsen and Aalberg, 2023, pp. 146-147). And therefore, they propose a five-layer model that includes the credibility of the intermediary platform (e.g., Facebook) and the credibility of the intermediary sender (the individual or actor sharing the story) as additional credibility cues influencing audience evaluations (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 146-147). The authors also connect these layers to heuristic processing, emphasizing that credibility evaluations are often shaped by mental shortcuts and cues (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 147-148).

To test the five-layer model, the authors conducted an experiment using the 2017 Norwegian Election Campaign Panel Study (NECS). In the study, one group is shown the news on the original news site, and another group is shown the same story shared on Facebook, with the original news outlet still visible in the presentation (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 149-150). In the part of the experiment where they used Facebook, the researchers used 2 ways of showing how the news was shared: in one version, it was shared by a neutral person, and in the other version, it was shared by a politician. This allowed them to compare how participants reacted in each situation and whether some versions were seen as more credible than others (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 148-150). To see whether the original news source affects trust, the same experiment is also used as if it came from either the public broadcaster NRK or the commercial broadcaster TV2 (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, p. 150).

The central measure in the study was a news credibility score, which is based on two things: how much participants trusted the information in the article and how politically biased they thought it was (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, p. 151). The authors then tested whether seeing the story on Facebook made it seem less credible, if credibility drops when a politician shares it, and if the effect depends on which political party the audience supports (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 148-149).

The findings show that when people encounter news on Facebook, they perceive it as less credible than when they see the same story on an original news website (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 152). The results also show that the negative effect is larger when the story is shared by a politician than by a neutral individual (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 152-153). Furthermore, the authors also find responses to politician-shared stories vary depending on the audience's party support, although the pattern differed between the Conservative and Labor conditions (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 153-155).

In addition, the study also finds that Facebook lowers the credibility of news stories no matter which outlet the story comes from. Even though the story is generally seen as more credible when coming from a broadcast, Facebook still reduces credibility even though the original source is trusted (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 154-155). In the discussion of their study, the authors conclude that credibility judgments in digital news settings are shaped not only by the news story and the news organization but also by the platform where the story is shared and by the person who shares it (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023, pp. 155-156).

2.3 Young audiences news habits and experiences on social media

This section focuses on young audiences' news habits and experiences on social media. Hendrickx (2025) looks at how young adults encounter and experience news on Instagram and TikTok as part of everyday platform use (pp. 5736-5739), while Swart and Broersma (2024) examine how young people understand what feels like news on Instagram (pp. 1620-1623). Together, these studies help show how young audiences meet, recognize, and make sense of news in social media environments.

In a 2025 study, Hendrickx examines how young adults encounter and experience news on both Instagram and TikTok. In this study, the author addresses the gap: although these platforms have become places where users encounter news, very little is known about how

young people encounter and experience news there (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5736-5738). Therefore, the study takes a young audience perspective, aiming to understand news consumption on social media. It moves beyond just an "exposure" as a focus instead, and it aims to understand how news is met and interpreted in everyday platform routines (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5738-5739).

A key conceptual move in the article is the distinction between encountering news and experiencing news. Hendrickx explains that "encountering" better captures the situated ways news appears in people's media flows. While "experiencing" focuses on how users interpret news encounters as meaningful (or not), including how they emotionally and practically relate to it (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5738-5739). The study links this to broader developments in the field, including the "(radical) audience turn" and attention to mobile, emotional, and everyday dimensions of news use. Where news is accessed more "instantly" through smartphones and platform feeds rather than through fixed routines like news websites (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5738-5739).

Methodologically, the study worked with 25 in-depth interviews with young Belgian (Flemish) adults aged 18-24 (Hendrickx, 2025, p. 5736). A central element in their interviews was the walkthrough method, which had participants scroll through both Instagram and TikTok feeds for 1 minute during the interview and describe what they encountered and how they experienced it (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5741-5743). Importantly, the author notes that news items appeared only rarely during this exercise. And this led to a follow-up discussion about how news typically appears in young people's feeds (Hendrickx, 2025, p. 5743).

The findings show that participants largely describe news on Instagram and TikTok as sporadic and often incidental, rather than something they actively seek out when using these platforms (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5743-5744). When participants want to follow news channels, they rely on other channels (such as news apps or websites). While social media news encounters are more closely tied to general scrolling routines (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5743-5744). In this way, the study highlights how encountering news on platforms can be shaped by platform infrastructures and everyday media habits rather than by news-seeking.

Hendrickx also says that users do not necessarily experience Instagram and TikTok as the same kind of platform for a news environment. They form different expectations of what each platform is "for," which influence whether and how news fits into their experience of the

platform (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5736-5737). This supports the broader idea that platform-specific cultures matter for how news is encountered and evaluated. In addition, the study shows how young adults decide what "news" means within platform environments, meaning whether certain platform content should count as news at all (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5744-5745). Finally, the title of this study, "normal news is boring," connects to how participants experience news as something that can feel important but not necessarily engaging within the attention platform feeds (Hendrickx, 2025, pp. 5744-5745).

In another 2024 study from Swart & Broersma, the authors explore how young people perceive and recognize news on Instagram by focusing on what content "feels like news" in everyday use (pp. 1621-1622). The study begins with the observation that news is encountered in environments where journalism appears alongside entertainment, advertising, influencers, and misinformation, which makes it hard to decide what looks like news (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1622). Therefore, their aim is to understand how news is seen and perceived within the hybrid, visually structured environment of Instagram (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1621-1623). The authors also argue that these perceptions matter because what users categorize as news shapes how they relate to the content and how they judge its reliability (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1621).

Methodologically, the study is part of a larger longitudinal study, collected from 2020 to 2022, that looks into young people's smartphone use (Swart & Broersma, 2024, p. 1624). Moreover, this study works with a three-step qualitative research design. This contains combining in-depth interviews, think-aloud protocols, and a walkthrough of participants' smartphone and Instagram use (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1623-1625). The participants in this study were 111 Dutch smartphone users aged 16-25 who identified Instagram as one of the three most important news apps on their phones (Swart & Broersma, 2024, p. 1624). A strength of this design is that it captures perceptions of news as situated interpretations connected to the specific content they encounter in their feeds (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1623-1625).
In their findings, Swart and Broersma (2024) show that young people often know what news should be like, but these ideas do not always align with what feels like news in the Instagram environment (pp. 1625-1626). The study finds that participants experience tension between learned cultural definitions of news and the reality of what appears in their feeds, where news is

ingrained in visually similar formats across different types of content (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1625-1626).

To explain how young people manage this tension, the authors identify traditionalism, compartmentalization, homogenization, and reconceptualization as four orientations to understand this (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1625-1627). Traditionalism describes participants who maintain a narrow definition of news and say that Instagram content is not real news (Swart & Broersma, 2024, p. 1626-1627). Compartmentalization captures how some participants separate different kinds of news-like information into categories or degrees, while homogenization reflects a broadening of what counts as news so that much information can become news-like (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1627-1630). And lastly, reconceptualization refers to participants who fundamentally adjust their understanding of news in response to their everyday experiences in the Instagram environment (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1630-1631). Across these orientations, the study shows that news recognition is shaped by how Instagram's platform environment blends and formats information.

Lastly, participants express uncertainty about whether new content on Instagram can be trusted, especially when compared with traditional news media, which they saw as more professionally vetted and reliable. (Swart & Broersma, 2024, p. 1626). In this way, Swart and Broersma (2024) show that what content feels like is connected to how young people relate to journalism, including how they judge credibility and decide whether something deserves serious attention (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1621).

2.4 Positioning of the present study with existing research

The focus of this thesis developed from the existing studies discussed in the literature review. Swart and Broersma's (2024) study showed that Instagram can be understood as a mixed information environment, where news appears alongside entertainment, advertising, personal content, and other types of information (pp. 1620-1622). This made Instagram relevant to examine further in this thesis. Hendrickx (2023) informed the focus on platform-native Instagram journalism by showing how news can be created specifically for social media platforms (pp. 1810-1811). Hendrickx (2025) further informed the focus on everyday news encounters by showing how young adults often encounter news on platforms such as Instagram incidentally rather than through direct news-seeking (pp. 5743-5744). Lastly, Gehrke et al.

(2025) in their study showed how young adults assess news on social media through cues such as source recognition, reputation, and consistency, which informed the focus of this study on credibility assessment (pp. 1508-1509). Together, these studies inspired the present thesis to explore these issues from a different angle, by focusing specifically on international master's students in Denmark and how they assess the credibility of platform-based news on Instagram, which cues they rely on, and how these assessments relate to their trust in journalism on the platform.

2.5 Delimitation

One delimitation of the literature review is that the studies often use broad terms such as young people, adults or audiences. These age groups do not always fully match this study, which focuses on international master's students aged approximately 20-30. Some of the reviewed studies include younger participants, such as teenagers or people in their early twenties. Another delimitation is that not all studies focus specifically on Instagram, as some of the studies also examine other platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. Therefore, the findings from previous research cannot be transferred directly to the present study. However, the literature remains relevant because it supports other aspects, such as addressing younger users' encounters with news, credibility judgments, and platform-based news experiences.

3. Theories

Building on the literature review, the following section introduces the theoretical perspectives that guide this thesis. The theories were chosen based on the elements from problem formulation and were informed by literature review, which highlighted the importance of credibility cues, trust in journalism, and Instagram as a platform environment. Sundar's MAIN model was chosen because it provides a framework for understanding how users rely on cues and heuristics, so mental shortcuts when assessing credibility in digital media (Sundar, 2008, pp. 73-79). Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust in news media was chosen because the thesis examines how participants' credibility assessments relate to trust in journalism on Instagram (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240). And lastly, van Dijck and Poell's concept of social media logic was chosen because Instagram is not treated as a neutral channel, but as a platform environment that shapes how news is encountered, made visible, and interpreted (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 2-5).

The table below provides an overview of what each theoretical perspective explains and how it applies to this thesis. The following sections explain each perspective in more detail.

Table 1: Overview of the selected theoretical perspectives

Theoretical perspective	What the theory explains	How it applies to this thesis
Sundar's MAIN model	Explains how digital media affordances create cues that can shape credibility judgments, especially through modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability (Sundar, 2008, pp. 73-79).	It is used to analyze which cues participants rely on when assessing Instagram news.
Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust in news media	Explains trust in news media as multidimensional, including trust in topic selection, fact selection, accuracy of depictions, and journalistic assessment (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240).	It is used to interpret how participants' credibility judgments relate to trust in journalism on Instagram.
van Dijck and Poell's social media logic framework	Explains how social media platforms shape the organization and circulation of information through programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 5-10).	It is used to understand how Instagram's platform environment shapes participants' news encounters.

Note. Author's own creation

3.1 Sundar's MAIN model

Sundar (2008) describes the MAIN model as a tool that is "primarily concerned with the technological aspects of digital media that can influence credibility judgments" (p. 79). In simpler words, it helps explain how people judge credibility in digital media environments. As in today's world, people do not evaluate credibility only by carefully examining content, but instead they often rely on specific cues that help them make quick decisions about whether information appears credible and trustworthy (Sundar, 2008, pp. 78-79). The author also says that this matter is important in online environments, where users are exposed to large amounts of information and are not always able to evaluate everything in depth (Sundar, 2008, p. 77). And therefore, in such situations, users rely on heuristics, or mental shortcuts, that are triggered by features of the medium itself rather than by content alone (Sundar, 2008, pp. 74-75).

The MAIN model has four central technological affordances that shape the credibility judgments, and these are modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability (Sundar, 2008, p. 78). These affordances are important because they transmit cues that trigger heuristics and can lead to judgments about the quality and credibility of information (Sundar, 2008, pp. 79-80). Therefore, the model moves beyond approaches that treat credibility as a fixed characteristic of a source or message. Instead, it shows that credibility can be shaped by the design and structure of digital media, and by the way users experience those environments (Sundar, 2008, pp. 92-93)

Modality, the first affordance, is a form in which information is presented, such as text, images, audio, video, or combinations of these. Sundar (2008) says that different modalities can trigger different heuristics, including realism, being there, novelty, distraction, and intrusiveness (pp. 80-82). This means that users may respond differently to information depending on how it is packaged and presented. Some modalities may increase a sense of realism or immediacy, while others may create skepticism if they appear overly flashy or distracting. Modality, therefore, matters because the presentation format itself can influence how credible content appears, even before users engage deeply with the message (Sundar, 2008, pp. 80-82).

Agency is the second affordance, and the meaning behind it is that it concerns the perceived source of information. In digital media environments, the source behind news is more complex than in traditional media because content may be associated with institutions, algorithms, or other users (Sundar, 2008, p. 83). Sundar (2008) argues that agency cues can activate heuristics such as authority, bandwagon, machine, social presence, helper, and identity

(pp. 83-85). These matters because users may see credibility differently depending on whether information comes from an expert source, from an objective system, or from a socially present person. Therefore, the model highlights that source judgments in digital media are not always straightforward but are shaped by how agency is communicated within the platform or interface (Sundar, 2008, pp. 83-85).

Interactivity is the third affordance, referring to how users can engage with and shape their experience of digital content (Sundar, 2008, pp. 85-88). Sundar (2008) describes interactivity as "the most distinctive affordance of digital media" and discusses that it can cue heuristics such as responsiveness, choice, control, flow, contingency, and own-ness (pp. 85-88). These heuristics influence whether users perceive content as relevant, tailored, manageable, or meaningful (Sundar, 2008, pp. 86-88). At the same time, the model does not assume that more interactivity always leads to more positive evaluations. Sundar (2008) argues that technological affordances can create both positive and negative effects, and that too much choice can overwhelm rather than empower users (pp. 79, 87).

Navigability is the fourth affordance, referring to how users move through digital content and how information is structured. Sundar (2008) explains that navigability can trigger heuristics such as browsing, elaboration, scaffolding, prominence, similarity, and play (pp. 89-92). These heuristics help users decide what appears important, relevant, useful, or worth further attention. In this sense, navigability affects credibility because the organization, accessibility, and presentation of information can shape users' judgments before the content itself is fully evaluated. The model therefore suggests that credibility is influenced not only by what information says, but also by how users encounter and move through it in digital environments (Sundar, 2008, pp. 90-92).

Overall, the MAIN model views credibility as a judgment shaped by both technological cues and content. Its broader argument is that the four affordances: modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability can help explain perceived credibility in digital media beyond content characteristics alone, and that these affordances can strengthen or weaken content effects on credibility (Sundar, 2008, p. 92). This makes the model relevant for this thesis because it provides a way to examine how credibility judgments are formed in a social media platform environment where visual presentation, source cues, engagement features, and interface structure matter.

3.2 Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust in news media

The authors Kohring and Matthes (2007) developed a multidimensional theory of trust in news media that goes further the earlier studies about credibility. They say that prior communication research has mainly worked with the idea of credibility without properly defining it or grounding it; therefore, the authors suggest focusing on trust instead (pp. 231-332). This matters because it connects media research to broader sociological theories of trust, especially those associated with Luhmann, Giddens, and Simmel, while also drawing on Barber and Seligman in its broader sociological framing of trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 232, 238). This gives the concept of trust in news media a stronger theoretical grounding, rather than using it as a vague substitute for credibility

A main point in their argument is that trust becomes relevant in the context of uncertainty and risk. Drawing on sociological theories of trust, Kohring and Matthes (2007) argue that trust helps people deal with "the risk of an open future" and with "giving up control to someone else" (p. 238). In modern societies, people depend on expert sources like the news media because they cannot personally see or experience everything happening in social and political life themselves. Trust, therefore, makes it easier by helping people to rely on information provided by others, even though the future is never fully certain and some uncertainty will always remain (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-239).

Within this framework, Kohring and Matthes (2007) suggest that trust in news media should not be mainly understood as trust in absolute objectivity or truth. Instead, it is better understood as trust in the particular way journalism selects and presents information. Since journalism cannot cover everything, it always involves decisions about what to report, how to frame it, and how to interpret it. As a result, trusting the news means accepting the risk that journalists have selected some topics, facts, and interpretations over others. In their view, this selectivity is not a weakness of journalism but a basic condition of how journalism functions in modern society (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240).

Based on this understanding, Kohring and Matthes (2007) describe four dimensions of trust in news media, which are trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, and trust in journalistic assessment (pp. 239-240) Trust in the selection of topics means to trust is placed in the news media and that the chosen topics that are socially relevant and worthy of attention. Trust in the selectivity of facts concerns whether the

media include the important facts and background information needed to understand an issue. Trust in the accuracy of depictions refers to whether reported information is correct, truthful, and verifiable. Trust in journalistic assessment concerns whether journalistic interpretations and evaluations are well-founded and useful. Together, these four dimensions reflect different ways audiences decide whether news media are trustworthy and reliable (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 239-240).

The authors further discuss whether these four dimensions should be understood as part of a higher-order construct. In other words, trust in news media is not a single, simple attitude, but a broader form of trust made up of several related dimensions (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 240). Their empirical analysis supports this view by showing that trust in news media can be conceptualized as a second-order factor that explains four first-order dimensions: trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, and trust in journalistic assessment (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 240, 246).

This framework is used in this thesis because it offers a multidimensional rather than general or abstract way to think about trust in journalism. It makes it possible to examine not only whether participants trust platform-based news, but also whether they find the chosen topics relevant, whether they think important facts are included, whether they see the presentation as accurate, and whether they view journalistic interpretation as useful and well-grounded.

3.3 van Dijck and Poell's social media logic framework

Van Dijck and Poell's (2013) framework of social media logic offers a helpful framework for understanding how social media platforms shape communication in today's modern society (pp. 2-3). Their framework's main point is that social media are not only channels that exchange information, but it's a place that operates according to specific "norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies" which shape how communication works and how information becomes visible, valued, and exchanged (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 2). In this view, social media shape the conditions under which interaction takes place (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 2-3)

Van Dijck and Poell (2013) develop this idea in relation to the earlier concept of mass media logic, originally formulated by Altheide and Snow (pp. 3-5). While mass media logic referred to the principles through which traditional media organized public communication,

social media logic refers to the processes and practices through which platforms process information, channel communication, and organize social traffic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 3, 5). The authors discuss that these two logics are now deeply connected. As social media, instead of excluding older media, have entered into a dynamic relationship with them, where each is shaping the other across areas of public life such as journalism, politics, activism, and other institutional settings (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 2, 5, 11).

To explain this logic, van Dijck and Poell (2013) identify four main elements: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (p. 2). These elements help describe how platforms shape attention, visibility, and interaction. These together form the basis of a broader platform logic that affects not only what users do online, but also how institutions adapt to and operate within platform environments (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 2-5).

The first element, programmability, refers to the ability of platforms to structure and steer users' use of the platform through code, algorithms, interfaces, and platform design. At the same time, users can also shape flows of communication through their own activity, which means that programmability involves an ongoing interaction between platform and users (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 5-6). The concept highlights that communication on social media is never completely spontaneous or user-driven, because it is always shaped within environments designed by platform owners.

Popularity is the second element, and it refers to the ways platforms rank, measure, and provide visibility. On social media, popularity is often expressed through indicators such as likes, shares, retweets, views, follower counts, or trending topics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6-7). Van Dijck and Poell (2013) show that these metrics do more than simply reflect what is already popular. They also help produce and reinforce popularity by giving greater visibility to certain people, topics, and content over others (pp. 6-8). Popularity is therefore both measured and shaped by platforms, making it a key mechanism through which attention is distributed.

Connectivity is the third element, and it refers to the ways platforms connect users, content, advertisers, and institutions. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue that social media platforms present themselves as tools for human connectedness, but this process is always mediated by platform architectures and commercial interests (pp. 8-9). Therefore, connectivity is referred to as socio-technical and economic arrangements through which platforms organize relations between people, information, and commercial actors. In this sense, connections on

social media are not only organic, as they are shaped by recommendation systems, personalized suggestions, and customization (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 8-9).

Datafication is the fourth and last element that refers to the transformation of social action into quantifiable data. According to van Dijck and Poell (2013), platforms continuously collect and process user data in ways that make communication measurable, trackable, and analyzable in real time (pp. 9-10). Datafication is important because it enables platforms to organize, measure, and personalize content. The user data helps shape what appears in the feed, how popularity is measured, and how platforms connect users to content through recommendations (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 9-10). At the same time, van Dijck and Poell stress that data are never simply raw or neutral. The collection and interpretation of data are always shaped by platform infrastructures and by the interests of those who control them (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 9-10). Overall, van Dijck and Poell (2013) argue that social media logic is reshaping public communication because these platform mechanisms influence how information is organized, circulated, and valued across social life (p. 11).

This framework works well with this thesis because it is a framework that helps a broader understanding of the platform environment in which platform-based news on Instagram is encountered and evaluated. It suggests that credibility judgments are not only shaped by the news content itself, but also by platform dynamics such as visibility, engagement metrics, algorithmic organization, connectivity, and the data-driven structure of social media.

4. Methods

4.1 Philosophy of science

This study adopts a social constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. From a social constructivist ontological perspective, social reality is not understood as a fixed but as something created through socially shared meanings, everyday interactions, and practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, pp. 168-169). The authors Berger and Luckmann (1967) state that "reality is socially constructed" (p. 13), further they say that human knowledge is "developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" (p. 15). They also describe everyday life as a reality "interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world", and as a world that "originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these" (p. 33).

This ontological position is connected to this study because credibility and trust in news are outcomes of processes in which individuals interpret and judge news in context. They are not treated as fixed properties. So, the judgments of credibility and trustworthiness are created through individuals' ongoing evaluations of news content. In digital media environments such as Instagram, evaluations take place within contexts where news appears alongside other forms of content. These evaluations may be shaped by personal background, prior experiences with media, and varying degrees of familiarity with particular news sources and journalistic practices and the platform context in which news is encountered.

This ontological position is closely linked to the study's epistemology. From an epistemological perspective, this thesis works with an interpretivist position. Schwandt (1998) explains interpretive inquiry as oriented toward understanding social life through meaning, including "grasping the actor's definition of a situation" (p. 221). Rather than seeking an explanation modeled on the natural sciences, interpretivism is concerned with lived reality, context, and the meanings social actors attach to their experiences. Schwandt (1998) further argues that interpretivist approaches attend to "intersubjective, common meanings" and to the processes through which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained, and modified in specific contexts of human action (p. 225). In this study, this interpretive approach is applied to participants' encounters with news on Instagram, with particular attention to how they interpret credibility through platform-specific cues. Knowledge about credibility and trust in news is

therefore produced through interpreting how participants themselves understand and evaluate news in relation to their everyday media habits.

This shapes the methods used in the study. The purpose of the study is not to determine whether news content is objectively credible, but to understand how credibility judgments are formed in practice and how these evaluations relate to their trust in journalism on the platform. The study, therefore, focuses on how participants interpret news within the Instagram environment, where cues such as source recognition, visual style, and engagement signals matter because they shape how participants perceive and judge credibility on Instagram. In this sense, credibility and trust is understood not as something that belongs to news but as something actively noticed and created by users through different cue evaluations in platform environments.

A strength of this approach is that it aligns with the study's aim, as it makes it possible to explore participants' perspectives on credibility and trust in news in their everyday use of Instagram through interviews and thematic analysis. However, a limitation is that the study does not assess whether the news content participants encounter is objectively accurate or credible. The findings should therefore be understood as insights into participants perspectives on credibility judgments, rather than as general claims about the credibility of Instagram news or all users experiences.

4.2 Research approach

Building on the philosophy of science discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter explains how the thesis moves from epistemological and ontological assumptions to methodological choices. It brings together the main elements of the research approach and shows how these work together to support the study's ability to answer the research question. The table below summarizes the main components of the research approach presented.

Table 2: Overview of the research approach

Element	Choice	Purpose
Research approach	Qualitative, mono-method	To explore how international master's students in Denmark assess the credibility of short-form news on Instagram and how these assessments relate to trust in journalism
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews	To capture participants own reflections, interpretations, and experiences in relation to Instagram news use
Sampling method	Purposive and convenient sampling method	To recruit participants who matched the inclusion criteria and were directly relevant to the research question
Research perspective	Social constructivist/ interpretivist	To understand credibility as something constructed through participants everyday meaning-making in a specific platform context
Time horizon	Cross-sectional	To examine participants current credibility assessments and news-use at a specific point in time
Theory-research relationship	Abductive	To allow the analysis to move back and forth between empirical material and relevant theoretical perspectives during interpretation
Data analysis	Reflexive thematic analysis with primarily data-driven coding, informed by the theoretical framework	To identify and interpret patterns of shared meaning in participants' accounts while remaining grounded in the interview material
Research quality	Credibility, transferability, dependability, and transparency	To strengthen the trustworthiness of the study through grounded interpretation, clear contextual description, and a transparent analytic process

Note. Author's own creation

In line with the philosophy of science presented in the previous chapter, this study works with a qualitative research strategy and uses semi-structured interviews as its data collection method. Qualitative research is used when the aim is to explore how people understand, interpret, and make sense of their social world (Bryman, 2012, p. 399). Bryman (2012) describes

qualitative research as involving a commitment to "viewing events and the social world through the eyes of the people that they study" (p. 399) and emphasizes that "the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied" (p. 399). In this study, this meant that a researcher played a role in gathering and understanding the data, while aiming to keep the analysis grounded in the participants' own perspectives and accounts. This approach is suitable as the purpose of this thesis is to examine how international master's students in Denmark assess the credibility of platform-base news on Instagram, which cues they draw on in these assessments, and how these judgments relate to their trust in journalism as it appears on the platform.

In relation to the time horizon, the study is cross-sectional, as data is collected at a single point in time instead of over a longer period of time. Bryman (2012) describes a cross-sectional design with research conducted "at a single point in time" and "on more than one case" (p. 60). This study gathered ten semi-structured interviews within the same time frame, which made this study cross-sectional.

Furthermore, the relationship between theory and research in this study is guided by abductive logic. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe abduction as relevant in "situations of uncertainty" (p. 119) and argue that in the "unpredictable conversational world of human beings in qualitative interviews … a more dynamic or iterative abductive approach must be used instead" (p. 119). In this thesis, an abductive approach is therefore used as the analysis does not only work with a fixed theoretical frame. Instead, it moves back and forth from the interview material and relevant theoretical perspectives in order to develop an interpretation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 118, 119).

The participants for this study were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012, pp. 201, 418). Furthermore, the data collected for this study were generated through ten semi-structured interviews. As Bryman (2012) notes, interviewing in qualitative research is typically "of the unstructured or semi-structured kind" (p. 498). He further explains that in a semi-structured interview, the researcher has "a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide," while the interviewee still has "a great deal of leeway in how to reply" (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). This offers flexibility and allows participants to elaborate on their own experiences and perspectives.

The collected data is analyzed using data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2018, p. 61) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 4-5). The first step in the analysis of data is data-driven coding, as the researcher starts without a coding frame but develops the codes through repeated readings of the interview material. As Gibbs (2018) explains, data-driven coding is "usually called open coding" (p. 61). In this process, the researcher does not begin with a set of pre-existing codes, but instead develops codes through close engagement with the interview material. Gibbs (2018) also notes that "most researchers move backward and forwards between both sources of inspiration during their analysis" (p. 62), which is consistent with the present study's abductive approach. This means that while the early stages of coding remain data-led, later stages of analysis move toward a more analytical and theoretically informed interpretation.

The second step in the analysis of collected data is reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) present reflexive thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic approach concerned with developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a dataset (pp. 4-6). Rather than assuming that themes passively arise from the data, reflexive thematic analysis understands the researcher as playing an active role in producing the analysis, and Braun and Clarke (2022) explicitly stress that "themes don't emerge" (p. 92). In this study, the analysis follows Braun and Clarke (2022), six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, which include familiarization with the data, coding, theme development and review, theme refinement and naming, and writing up (p. 6).

Bryman (2012) discusses trustworthiness as an important measure in qualitative research and identifies credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as key dimensions (pp. 390). In the present thesis, particular emphasis is placed on credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility is supported by grounding the analysis in participants' interviews and by ensuring that the interpretations remain closely linked to the collected data. Transferability is supported by describing the participant group and research process, so that readers can judge whether the findings may also be relevant in similar contexts. Dependability is supported through a clear and consistent description of the analytic process, including transcription, coding, and theme development (Bryman, 2012, pp. 390-393). Confirmability is not emphasized separately here, since it overlaps to a large extent with the study's focus on credibility and transferability.

4.3 Data collection

The following section outlines the data collection process used in this thesis. It explains how the data were collected, including the choice of interview method, participant recruitment, and the practical conduct of the interviews.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews and interview guide

As the primary method of data collection, this study uses semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allows for exploring participants' experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making in depth, while still ensuring that the same central themes are addressed across interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p.14). Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe the semi-structured interview as a guided conversation that seeks to understand participants' world from their own perspectives, while neither using a completely open conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p.14).

Alongside the methodological choice to use semi-interviews, an interview guide (Appendix A) was developed to serve as a flexible framework for collecting data from participants. Brinkmann and Kvale describe such a guide as a script that can range from a brief overview of topics to a more detailed sequence of suggested questions, depending on the purpose of the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 63). In this study, the guide was organized around the research problem formulation and theoretical framework. The questions were informed by theories, but were not designed as an inflexible framework. Instead, the guide worked with abductive logic, where theories helped shape the overall focus of the interviews, while still leaving room for participants to introduce perspectives and examples (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p.119). Moreover, the questions explored how participants encounter news content on Instagram, what makes such content appear to them credible or not credible, and which cues they rely on in these credibility assessments. The guide also included questions about how these assessments relate to their trust in journalism on Instagram. This structure ensured that all interviews addressed the same overall themes while still leaving room for participants to introduce examples and reflections that were especially relevant to them.

Part of the interview was a scroll-through Instagram task that followed the introductory questions about the participant's background and news use. The task lasted around four to five minutes and was placed early in the interview, before the more detailed questions about

credibility and trust. The task was designed for participants to open Instagram and use it as they normally would, whether this meant starting with their feed, explore page, reels, or stories. And then the participants were asked to scroll through the platform, and when they encountered something they understood as news, to describe what they saw, what caught their attention, and how they understood it. This was followed by brief follow-up questions to better understand how they view the news content.

The scrolling task was inspired by qualitative studies discussed in the literature review, specifically Swart and Broersma's (2024) use of Instagram walk-through exercises and think-aloud protocols to understand what feels like news to young people on Instagram (pp. 1624-1625), as well as Hendrickx's (2025) use of the walkthrough method to study how young adults encounter and experience news on Instagram and TikTok (pp. 5741-5742). Although the aim of the present study is different the from the inspired literature review, the task had a similar methodological purpose, as it allowed participants to reflect on news content while using Instagram in real time, rather than only describing their platform use from memory. It also helped make visible how participants moved through Instagram and what drew their attention. While it represented only a small part of their everyday Instagram use, it supported the real-time assessment of participants' actual platform experience.

4.3.2 Sampling, participant selection and recruitment

The sample consisted of 10 participants, all of whom were international master's students currently living in Denmark and aged 20 to 30 years, thus belonging to the young adult age group. These criteria were chosen because they are directly connected to the problem formulation, which focuses on international master's students in Denmark and their credibility assessments of platform-based news on Instagram. This made it relevant to focus on a group whose everyday media use is shaped both by their student status and by their position as international students navigating news in a digitally mediated environment.

The sampling strategy was primarily purposive. Bryman describes purposive sampling as selecting participants "in a strategic way" so that they are "relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). In this study, participants were therefore selected on the basis of characteristics directly relevant to the project, as outlined above. Since purposive

sampling is a non-probability approach, it does not allow statistical generalization to a wider population (Bryman, 2012, p. 418).

At the same time, the sampling process also included an element of convenience sampling, since access to participants was partly gained through the researcher's personal network and existing social contacts. Bryman notes that a convenience sample may sometimes be used when the opportunity to gather data is "too good an opportunity to miss," even though such data do not allow definitive findings because of the problem of generalization (Bryman, 2012, p. 201). In this study, convenience sampling operated at the level of recruitment, while purposive sampling remained the main sampling logic.

Initial contact with participants was made by sending a short invitation message (Appendix C) explaining the topic of the study, the duration of the interview, and the format of participation. Those who expressed interest were then contacted again to arrange an interview time, and the written consent form (Appendix B) was shared with them. Brinkmann and Kvale, drawing on Potter and Hepburn, note that interview reports should clearly describe how participants were recruited and how the interview task was communicated to them; these aspects were made explicit in the present study (Potter & Hepburn, 2005, as cited in Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 101).

4.3.3 Conduct of the interviews - recording, transcription, and data management

All ten interviews gathered for this thesis were collected individually. They were held online via Microsoft Teams in English for approximately 45-60 minutes. The online format was chosen for practical reasons, particularly ease of scheduling and the possibility of recording the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed about the background and purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to decline answering any question, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were also asked to give written and verbal consent to the recording and transcription of the interview. When it comes to the written consent, participants were provided a consent form (Appendix B) before the interview.

All interviews were audio- and video-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. They are all submitted as additional material to the thesis. This supported detailed analysis and helped ensure close familiarity with the material from an early stage of the research process. As

Brinkmann and Kvale note, transcription is not simply a technical task, but an interpretive process in which spoken conversation is transformed into written text (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 106).

All interview data, such as recordings and transcripts, were stored securely and handled confidentially. Personal details about interviewees were removed during the transcription process, and participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Only the researcher had access to the original files. The collected data was also handled in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). This reflects the ethical importance of careful handling of interview material throughout the research process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 201, pp. 29-30). All interview transcripts are submitted as additional material to the thesis and are labeled using participants' pseudonyms.

4.4 Data analysis method

To explore how participants assess the credibility of platform-based news on Instagram through various cues, and how these assessments relate to their trust in journalism on Instagram, the interview material was analyzed through data-driven coding and reflexive thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2018, p. 61; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 4-5). The analysis was carried out in six phases, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) outline of reflexive thematic analysis (p.35).

The first phase was familiarization with the data. This stage did not begin only after transcription, it had already started during the collection of interviews, as some early impressions and recurring points began to stand out as participants spoke. It developed further during the transcription of the interviews. The transcripts were then read several times to gain an overall sense of the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2022) say that familiarization is the first phase of reflexive thematic analysis, in which the researcher engages with the data through repeated reading and note-making, and begins to notice patterns that may later inform coding and theme development (pp. 42-48).

The second phase of reflexive thematic analysis is coding, which Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as an "organic and evolving process" (p. 54). The coding in this study was data-driven. As Gibbs (2018) says, "data-driven coding" means that "the researcher starts out without codes, and develops them through readings of the material" (p. 11). In this study, this phase was based on close engagement with the data. The coding process started during the first close work

with the interview material, particularly when the interviews were being reviewed, corrected, and edited. At that stage, some initial ideas for codes had already begun to form and had been noted down. The list of codes at the beginning was long and broad, but as the process of reading interviews repeated, the codes became more structured and aligned into more specific ones. The final chosen codes were marked in the interview transcripts and also entered into an Excel coding sheet, with a separate tab for each interview labeled with the participant's pseudonym. Although I did not keep formal analytic memos from the beginning, I later revisited the coded transcripts and Excel coding sheet to reflect on why some codes were kept, changed, or removed, and how the final codes and themes connected to the problem formulation and theoretical framework. This Excel sheet is submitted as additional material to the thesis. Once the codes that appeared across several interviews became more visible, they were applied consistently across the dataset. This helped keep the coding process coherent and supported the later development of initial themes. An example of the coding sheet is shown below in the Figure 1.

Figure 1: Example from coding sheet

Quote	Interview	Page	Code
"The profile for sure caught my attention because I follow it on purpose..."	Mariela	p. 3	Post credibility cues - source cue
"Since I have followed them for some time, I also know their visual language. When I see the picture, I can often guess that it is from them."	Mariela	p. 3	Post credibility cues - source visual recognision
"Now I tend to prefer simple visuals for regular news because they feel less manipulated."	Mariela	p. 7	Post credibility cues - visual cue
"Comments, I will have to say sometimes matter, especially if I am questioning the post."	Mariela	p. 8	Post credibility cues - social cue
"...if it's small profiles that are random and they have no association and other things, I don't usually trust them at all, especially if it only has a few videos about a certain topic. In that case, likes and the profile	Mariela	p. 8	Post credibility cues - source, social cue
"Of course, I would double-check if it were information I wanted to use for something."	Mariela	p. 4	Evidence and verification
"If it were data-based, numerical, or something I wanted to use in an argument, I would double-check it."	Mariela	p. 4	Evidence and verification
"Comments can sometimes help me see if there is something wrong, or if I misunderstood or missed something."	Mariela	p. 8	Evidence and verification
"If I see similar information across multiple serious media sources that I trust, I will probably trust it more."	Mariela	p.11	Evidence and verification
"The third post I see is from SME from Slovakia."	Mariela	p. 3	Live scrolling reaction
"I opened the description because I wanted to see if something interesting was happening."	Mariela	p. 3	Live scrolling reaction
"I do not think I would read more about it, but I did open the description, so I already read the short version."	Mariela	p. 3	Live scrolling reaction
"First is what I read by myself and that I have to admit most of them start by some kind of nudge from social media. Then I usually continue looking through often Slovak pages if it's something related to my country because I'm very much in touch with the news from there. If it's not, then usually I opt for the BBC and similar pages to check further on them."	Mariela	p. 1	Personal relevance
"I am Slovak, so if the news is from Slovakia, I am not sure whether to call it national or international."	Mariela	p. 2	Personal relevance
"...my algorithm is already set up to what I like, including news and specific things I am interested in at the moment."	Mariela	p. 2	Algorithm influence

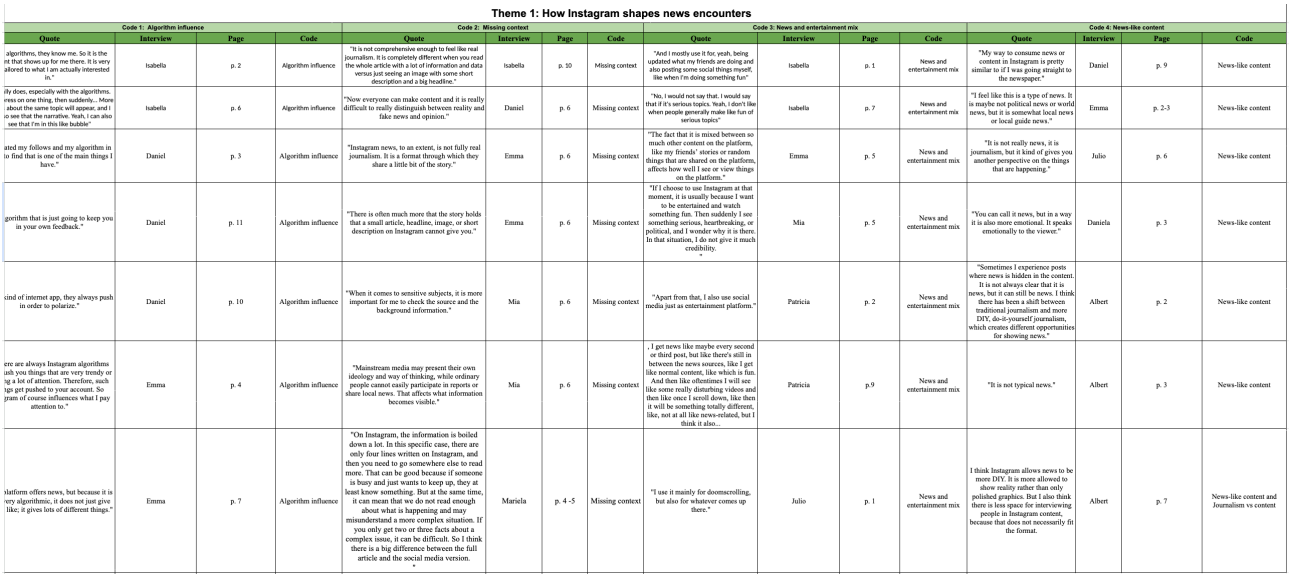
Note. Authors own creation

In this project, the third and fourth phases were closely connected in practice. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe the third phase as the generation of initial themes, where the researcher begins to consider how different codes can come together and whether they can be organized

into a central idea (pp. 78-80). The fourth phase is described as the phase in which the researcher begins to generate initial themes and to consider how different codes can come together and whether they can be organized into a central idea (pp. 78-80). In this study, both phases involved returning to the interviews and the codes, reviewing how they related to one another, and narrowing them down into possible groups. These groups formed the basis for the initial themes, which were then further reviewed and refined.

After reviewing and refining the themes, the fifth phase involved defining and naming the final themes. Braun and Clarke (2022) say that in reflexive thematic analysis "a theme captures shared meaning, united by a central organizing concept" (p. 77). This phase is also described as a refining, defining, and naming process for themes, ensuring that each theme has a clear central concept and analytic contribution (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 108-113). In the present study, this meant that the final themes were clarified, refined, and named in a way that made the analysis more clearly structured and easier to follow. The coding was data-driven, as mentioned above, while the later refinement of the themes was guided by the problem formulation and theoretical framework. This was important because the problem formulation helped keep the analysis focused on news encounters on Instagram, credibility assessment, cues, and trust in journalism, while the theoretical framework helped interpret the patterns identified in the data. In this way, the themes were not created from a fixed theoretical coding frame, but were refined through an abductive process that moved between the data, the research question, and the relevant theories. The Figure 2 below shows how the final themes were organized in the Excel sheet, with the related codes grouped under each theme.

Figure 2: Overview of final themes in excel



Theme 1: How Instagram shapes news encounters

Code 1: Algorithm influence				Code 2: Missing context				Code 3: News and entertainment mix				Code 4: News-like content			
Quote	Interview	Page	Code	Quote	Interview	Page	Code	Quote	Interview	Page	Code	Quote	Interview	Page	Code
algorithms, they know me. So it is the nt that shows up for me there. It is very ailored to what I am actually interested in." "	Isabella	p. 2	Algorithm influence	"It is not comprehensive enough to feel like real journalism. It is completely different when you read the whole article with a lot of information and data versus just seeing an image with some short description and a big headline." "	Isabella	p. 10	Missing context	"And I mostly use it for, yeah, being updated what my friends are doing and also posting some social things myself, like when I'm doing something fun" "	Isabella	p. 1	News and entertainment mix	"My way to consume news or content in Instagram is pretty similar to if I was going straight to the newspaper." "	Daniel	p. 9	News-like content
ily does, especially with the algorithms. ress on one thing, then suddenly... More about the same topic will appear, and I o see that the narrative. Yeah, I can also see that I'm in this like bubble" "	Isabella	p. 6	Algorithm influence	"Now everyone can make content and it is really difficult to really distinguish between reality and fake news and opinion." "	Daniel	p. 6	Missing context	"No, I would not say that. I would say that if it's serious topics. Yeah, I don't like when people generally make like fun of serious topics" "	Isabella	p. 7	News and entertainment mix	"I feel like this is a type of news. It is maybe not political news or world news, but it is somewhat local news or local guide news." "	Emma	p. 2-3	News-like content
ated my follows and my algorithm in o find that is one of the main things I have." "	Daniel	p. 3	Algorithm influence	"Instagram news, to an extent, is not fully real journalism. It is a format through which they share a little bit of the story." "	Emma	p. 6	Missing context	"The fact that it is mixed between so much other content on the platform, like my friends' stories or random things that are shared on the platform, affects how well I see or view things on the platform." "	Emma	p. 5	News and entertainment mix	"It is not really news, it is journalism, but it kind of gives you another perspective on the things that are happening." "	Julio	p. 6	News-like content
gorithm that is just going to keep you in your own feedback." "	Daniel	p. 11	Algorithm influence	"There is often much more that the story holds that a small article, headline, image, or short description on Instagram cannot give you." "	Emma	p. 6	Missing context	"If I choose to use Instagram at that moment, it is usually because I want to be entertained and watch something fun. Then suddenly I see something serious, heartbreaking, or political, and I wonder why it is there. In that situation, I do not give it much credibility." "	Mia	p. 5	News and entertainment mix	"You can call it news, but in a way it is also more emotional. It speaks emotionally to the viewer." "	Daniela	p. 3	News-like content
cind of internet app, they always push in order to polarize." "	Daniel	p. 10	Algorithm influence	"When it comes to sensitive subjects, it is more important for me to check the source and the background information." "	Mia	p. 6	Missing context	"Apart from that, I also use social media just as entertainment platform." "	Patricia	p. 2	News and entertainment mix	"Sometimes I experience posts where news is hidden in the content. It is not always clear that it is news, but it can still be news. I think there has been a shift between traditional journalism and more DIY, do-it-yourself journalism, which creates different opportunities for showing news." "	Albert	p. 2	News-like content
ere are always Instagram algorithms ush you things that are very trendy or ig a lot of attention. Therefore, such ngs get pushed to your account. So gram of course influences what I pay attention to." "	Emma	p. 4	Algorithm influence	"Mainstream media may present their own ideology and way of thinking, while ordinary people cannot easily participate in reports or share local news. That affects what information becomes visible." "	Mia	p. 6	Missing context	, I get news like maybe every second or third post, but like there's still in between the news sources, like I get like normal content, like which is fun. And then like oftentimes I will see like some really disturbing videos and then like once I scroll down, like then it will be something totally different, like, not at all like news-related, but I think it also...	Patricia	p.9	News and entertainment mix	"It is not typical news." "	Albert	p. 3	News-like content
latform offers news, but because it is ery algorithmic, it does not just give like; it gives lots of different things." "	Emma	p. 7	Algorithm influence	"On Instagram, the information is boiled down a lot. In this specific case, there are only four lines written on Instagram, and then you need to go somewhere else to read more. That can be good because if someone is busy and just wants to keep up, they at least know something. But at the same time, it can mean that we do not read enough about what is happening and may misunderstand a more complex situation. If you only get two or three facts about a complex issue, it can be difficult. So I think there is a big difference between the full article and the social media version." "	Mariela	p. 4 -5	Missing context	"I use it mainly for doomscrolling, but also for whatever comes up there." "	Julio	p. 1	News and entertainment mix	I think Instagram allows news to be more DIY. It is more allowed to show reality rather than only polished graphics. But I also think there is less space for interviewing people in Instagram content, because that does not necessarily fit the format. "	Albert	p. 7	News-like content and Journalism vs content

Note. Author's own creation

The sixth and last phase was writing up the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that writing is not only a reporting stage but also a part of the analytic process itself (pp. 117-124). This phase in the present study involved presenting the themes developed through interview reading, coding, and theme refinement in a clear analytical narrative. Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for this project analysis because the aim was to identify and interpret patterns in how participants understood credibility, platform cues, and trust in journalism on Instagram platform. This was done by combining data interpretation with illustrative quotations from the interviews and by relating the analysis to the theories and literature used in the study. The quotations included in the analysis are identified by participants' pseudonyms, and the page numbers refer to the relevant pages in the transcribed interviews. In this way, the write-up aimed both to present participants' perspectives and to interpret the findings in relation to existing research and the theories guiding the study. This also aligns with the abductive logic informing the analysis. This meant that the analysis moved back and forth between the data, theories, and literature review. In this way, theory or literature did not determine the initial coding beforehand, but worked along the later stages of the analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 118-119).

Reflecting on the data analysis process, one important point was that the analysis did not happen as one single stage but developed gradually over time. Some recurring points and tensions were already noticeable during the interviews, but it was mainly through transcription

and repeated reading of the material that these became clearer patterns. Even then, they were not always easy to fully understand, so the beginning of the coding process also took time. Another important point was that moving from codes to themes was not straightforward. While some codes appeared quite quickly, identifying broader themes required going back to the data several times, which shows that the process was interpretive and that it was also important to stay close to the data.

4.5 Ethical considerations

When conducting semi-structured interviews, as in this thesis, several ethical considerations need to be considered. Bryman (2012) identifies harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception as key ethical considerations in social research (p. 135). In this study, these ethical considerations were addressed in several ways. To begin with, when reaching out to potential participants, they were informed about the purpose of the study, that participation was based on their own choice, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. This mattered because some participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which could raise questions about whether they felt expected to take part. However, this was not the case, as potential participants were free to decline participation if they did not want to be involved. Moreover, participants who agreed to take part in an interview were provided with a written consent form beforehand, and verbal consent was also obtained at the beginning of the interview. This written and verbal consent form informed participants about the purpose of the study, the handling of their data, their right to withdraw from the study, and the confidentiality of their participation. They were also informed that to protect their anonymity, their names would be replaced with pseudonyms.

They were further made aware that they were not required to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with. To support this, the interviews were also collected in a supportive and professional tone. This was important in order to ensure that participation remained voluntary throughout the process and that participants were not pressured into discussing issues they did not feel comfortable with. Furthermore, during verbal consent obtained at the beginning of the interview, the participants also agreed to the recording and transcription of the interviews. The raw video recordings were accessible only to the researcher and will be deleted after the completion of the project. Ethical considerations also applied to the scrolling task, which was

part of the interview. Privacy was important here. For this reason, participants were not asked to share or record their screens while scrolling. Instead, they were asked to describe aloud what they saw when they encountered news content on Instagram.

4.6 Delimitations

First, the study focuses specifically on Instagram, even though participants sometimes mentioned other platforms and news sources during the interviews. These were only included in the analysis when participants referred to them as places for verifying, cross-checking, or comparing news they had encountered on Instagram. Second, because the study focuses on Instagram, it is also delimited to platform-based news rather than long-form journalism. Third, the participant group only includes international master's students in Denmark, which fits the focus of the problem formulation and allows attention to transnational news experiences. Finally, the study focuses on participants' own assessments of credibility and trust. It does not test whether the posts were factually accurate or analyze Instagram's algorithm directly.

5. Analysis

This section presents the findings from 10 semi-structured interviews interpreted through reflexive thematic analysis. The interviews were supported by a scrolling task, which helped capture participants' immediate encounters with news in their own Instagram feeds. The analysis is organized around three themes, developed through data-driven coding. The first examines how Instagram shaped participants' encounters with news, the second focuses on how participants assessed credibility through cues surrounding a post, and the third explores how these encounters and cue-based judgments related to trust in journalism on Instagram. Each theme is supported by interview quotes and connected to the theoretical framework and literature review where relevant.

Table 3: Overview of the main themes and their analytical role

Theme	Analytical focus	Role in the analysis
Theme 1: Encountering news in the Instagram feed	How participants first encountered, recognized, and made sense of news on Instagram.	Sets the platform context in which credibility judgments began.
Theme 2: Assessing credibility through cues	Which cues participants relied on when judging whether Instagram news seemed credible.	Shows how credibility was assessed at the level of the post and its surrounding platform context.
Theme 3: Trust in journalism on Instagram	How participants' encounters with Instagram news and their credibility assessments related to trust in journalism on the platform.	Connects the first two themes by showing how credibility judgments shaped conditional trust in journalism on Instagram.

Note. Author's own creation

5.1 Theme 1: Encountering news in the Instagram feed

The first theme looks at the Instagram environment in which participants encountered platform-based news. Before participants assessed cues surrounding a news post and judged how credible it seemed, they first encountered, noticed, and recognized the post within their own feed. The coding showed that these first encounters were shaped not only by the news content itself, but also by the platform context in which it appeared.

The scrolling task made this environment visible in practice. Participants did not encounter news in a separate news space, but as part of an ordinary Instagram feed where news

appeared alongside advertisements, personal content, entertainment, and other information. Albert, for example, first said, “First I get an advertisement from Booking.com,” (p.3) and afterward he noticed something like “...a little bit like news, but it is DIY. It is about goods or food becoming more expensive than they used to be. It is a video showing how much food prices have increased” (p. 4). Mariela’s scrolling task showed a similar mixture, “The first post I see is from a girl I know, so that is not really news; it is about her business. Then there is an advertisement for Syd Bank.” (p. 3). These examples show that Instagram news encounters were neither intentional nor accidental. As the scrolling task shows the mixed character of the Instagram feed. This meant that before assessing credibility, participants first had to notice and recognize news within the ordinary flow of the feed.

This also meant that news encounters were not always based on active news-seeking. Instead, news often appeared through a combination of chance, following choices, and the algorithm. Mariela explained this by saying, “I definitely see some kind of news or similar content every time I open Instagram. I think it happens both by chance and intentionally, because I subscribe to some news accounts that I trust. That way, I do not need to search for the news every day, because it gets pushed to me when something happens” (p. 2). Daniela similarly described how Instagram differs from actively choosing news you want to see or read: “With TV, you also choose to turn it on. But on Instagram, you might just go in to watch Reels, and then news pops up. You get interested and continue scrolling into other news” (p. 5). These examples show that Instagram news feed experiences were not intentional or accidental, as participants shaped their feeds through follows and interests. However, the platform still influenced what became visible and how easily they could keep scrolling.

When participants later reflected on these encounters, the algorithm became central to how they understood what appeared in their feeds. They were aware that encounters with news on Instagram were not neutral, or simply chosen by their own interests, but shaped by previous interactions, follows, interests, and platform recommendations. Isabella described this directly when she said, “The algorithms, they know me. So it is the content that shows up for me there. It is very well tailored to what I am actually interested in” (p. 2). At the same time, this personalization also created concern, as she later explained, “It really does, especially with the algorithms. So if I press on one thing, then suddenly... More things about the same topic will appear, and I can also see that the narrative. Yeah, I can also see that I'm in this like bubble”

(Isabella, p. 6). Ricard also described how he tried to curate his feed: “I curated follows and my algorithm in order to find that is one of the main things I have. So I will say every time I open it, I get new like my BBC, New York Times, some journalists that I follow” (p. 3). However, he also recognized the pull of the platform, explaining that there are “smart people working for Meta and all these apps in order to have you engage. So even if I don't really like the kind of format, sometimes if I don't control it, I just start in the rabbit hole and then half an hour has passed and I don't even realize” (Ricard, p. 3). These quotes show that personalization could make news feel relevant, but also made participants aware that their encounters with news can be influenced by algorithms, so shaped by the platform’s logic. This connects especially to van Dijck and Poell’s (2013) concepts of programmability and connectivity, as the authors describe Instagram’s algorithmic feed both that steers the flow of information and connects users to content through previous interactions, follows, interests, and personalized recommendations. (pp. 5-6, 8-9).

This algorithmic influence was also visible when participants described how quickly Instagram seemed to react to their behavior. Mariela explained, “If I interact with something from a different sphere of news, Instagram quickly reacts to it… I only liked it. After that, I started getting many more videos like that. At first it was okay, but then it became more extreme and more hate-sounding. It felt like Meta was pushing me further in that direction because I interacted with one post” (p. 5). Mia made a similar point when she said, “I think it creates a bubble around us, where we mostly see what we already want to see. It becomes difficult to know what others think or what others are doing outside our interest bubbles. The platform wants us to spend more time on it, so I think it influences us a lot” (p. 4). These examples show that participants did not only think about single posts, but also about the wider conditions under which some posts became visible to them. The quotes suggest that participants experienced the algorithm as something that is actively shaping their news environment, as it could make content feel relevant, but it could also repeat and intensify certain topics, making the feed feel narrower over time.

Algorithms were one aspect that influenced participants' feed, but another aspect, which was also visible in the scrolling task mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, was also the mixed character of the feed, which also shaped how participants experienced news. News did not appear separately from other content, but alongside entertainment, personal updates, influencer

content, and random videos. Emma explained, “The fact that it is mixed between so much other content on the platform, like my friends’ stories or random things that are shared on the platform, affects how well I see or view things on the platform” (p. 5). Mia described a similar experience: “If I choose to use Instagram at that moment, it is usually because I want to be entertained and watch something fun. Then suddenly I see something serious, heartbreaking, or political, and I wonder why it is there. In that situation, I do not give it much credibility” (p. 5). These quotes show how participants' perceptions of news posts on Instagram were shaped by what surrounded it, as a serious topic could feel out of place when it appeared in a space participants associated with entertainment or casual scrolling. This can be interpreted through van Dijck and Poell’s (2013) concept of social media logic, particularly programmability, in which platforms help structure and steer the flow of content users encounter (p. 5). This also connects to Swart and Broersma’s (2024) argument that Instagram creates an environment in which news appears in mixed space with entertainment, advertising, misinformation, and personal content (pp. 1620-1622). This makes it harder to distinguish journalism from other forms of information

For some participants, this mixture also affected their emotional attention. Mariela explained, “Sometimes I am looking at serious content about Iran, where people are demonstrating in the streets and you know it may not end well for all of them. Then I scroll further and suddenly I see DIY content or beautiful places. Then I come back to content about ICE or Iran again. It is very strange. I think it conditions us to ignore what is happening in the world because seeing people suffer becomes a normal part of the day” (p. 6). Daniela similarly said, “Because I receive so much news, I think you can become numb to it after a while. You see your friend’s story, then a news post, then something else from a friend, and then another news post. Because my feed contains so much news, sometimes I feel fed up with it” (p. 5). These examples show that Instagram shaped what news participants saw, but also how the participants emotionally processed it. When serious news appeared between personal posts and entertainment, it could become normalized, skipped, or lead to emotional numbness.

This algorithmic and mixed environment also shaped what participants understood as news. Some posts were informative, but not always clearly journalistic. Albert explained, “Sometimes I experience posts where news is hidden in the content. It is not always clear that it is news, but it can still be news. I think there has been a shift between traditional journalism and more DIY, do-it-yourself journalism, which creates different opportunities for showing news” (p.

2). Emma similarly said, “I feel like this is a type of news. It is maybe not political news or world news, but it is somewhat local news or local guide news” (pp. 2-3). These examples show that Instagram widened what participants could experience as news. However, it also made the boundaries of news less clear. News could appear as journalism, but also as local information, creator explanations, guides, political updates, or public-interest content in non-traditional formats.

To conclude, this first theme shows that participants came across news in an Instagram environment that was mixed, personalized, algorithmic, and not always clearly separated from other content. News appeared in the feed in different ways, sometimes through participants' own choice of following the account, sometimes by chance, and sometimes through algorithm recommendations. However, Instagram still played a role in shaping what became visible to them and how they experienced news. This means that participants' credibility assessment did not begin with an isolated post. It started with the first step of recognizing news within the flow of the feed and making sense of its context. Moreover, the next theme builds on this by examining how participants responded to these conditions through the cues surrounding a post, and how these cues shaped whether platform-based news seemed credible.

5.2 Theme 2: Assessing credibility through cues

Building on the first theme, this second theme focuses on participants' use of different cues to assess the credibility of news within the Instagram platform. The coding process showed that credibility was assessed not only through the post's content but also through cues surrounding it, which we will discuss in the following analysis.

The scrolling task showed the first layer of how participants encountered, recognized, and made sense of news within their own Instagram feeds. During the task, participants regularly, as a first step, checked whether a post appeared news-like at all. Julio, for example, noticed: “It is already the first thing opened up on my phone. It is Reuters and it says two local trains collided head-on in Denmark” (p. 2). In other cases, the content was more uncertain. Isabella expressed it in a way, “I don’t know if this is exactly news. There is some information about a Polish YouTuber that was accused of illegal gambling” (p. 3).

After participants made initial judgments about whether a post could be seen as news, they started to reflect on what made an Instagram post news, credible, or not credible. And this

was related to the source, so the profile behind the post became one of the first cues they mentioned. As Daniela said, “I think the social media account is what makes it credible. When I see a video, I first look at the account that posted it. If the account looks credible, then I am more likely to believe the news” (p. 5). Mariela similarly said, “Source, 100%. It is very important for me to see what the journal is” (p. 6). This shows that the source, so the profile behind the content, worked as an initial credibility filter before they fully considered the details of the story.

However, participants did not only talk about who posted the content, but also how they knew the source and what previous experience they had with it. Mariela said, “If I see something from a journal that I consider mostly neutral or aligned with values I see as right, based on what I have read from them over time, I take it more seriously” (p. 6). Similarly, Olivia said, “Some sources I know. So if it’s a source that is maybe well known in my country or online that they post news, that would make it credible” (p. 6). This shows that credibility was built over time through repeated encounters or pre-existing knowledge of the source or account behind the news.

This focus on source recognition also meant that unfamiliar sources or those with little context could create doubt and uncertainty. Daniel said, “If I see something in social media and I do not know who is talking, it is a random person. Automatically, I do not trust what I am seeing” (p. 9). Similarly, Mariela says “...if it's small profiles that are random and they have no association and other things, I don't usually trust them at all, especially if it only has a few videos about a certain topic. In that case, likes and the profile context do matter” (p. 8). Source recognition, therefore, played an important role in managing uncertainty in an environment where news may come from a variety of accounts. This can be interpreted through Sundar’s (2008) MAIN model, especially the agency dimension, because participants assessed credibility partly by looking at who appeared to be behind the information (p. 83). Sundar (2008) argues that in digital environments, sources and messages can serve as mental shortcuts for assessing credibility, especially when information is distributed through layers of sources (pp. 73-75). On Instagram, the source was not only a news organization, but a visible profile with followers, verification status, posting history, and social context. This also connects to van Dijck and Poell’s (2013) discussion of popularity, in which platform metrics such as following and liking shape how people, content, and ideas are measured, ranked, and made visible (pp. 7-8). And similar findings appear in a study by Gehrke et al. (2025), which found that young adults in

Denmark usually rely on reputation and consistency when assessing the credibility of news on social media (pp. 1503-1504).

Furthermore, another cue participants interpreted was a visual form of the news content they encountered on Instagram. Because Instagram is a visual platform, the way news looks shapes whether participants experience it as serious, informative, or attention-seeking. Mia explained this when she says, "I think the appearance and format matter. If it is presented in a serious and journalistic way, rather than in a fun or casual way, I feel that it is more credible" (p. 5). Mariela similarly says, "Now I tend to prefer simple visuals for regular news because they feel less manipulated" (p. 7). This shows that visual style became a cue for whether the post felt like news content or more like ordinary content. However, the visual form of Instagram news was also connected to visual attention. Olivia explained that sometimes it is "not even about the quality or what is in the article, but more about what gets my attention visually" (p. 4). Albert similarly says, "I have experienced videos where the main point or climax is shown at the beginning, and then the story continues afterwards. I question those kinds of videos because it feels like they are mainly trying to get my attention, not necessarily presenting the topic in the most correct way" (p. 11). Daniela added another dimension to this when she stated, "If I can sense that it is AI-generated, then I do not trust the news" (p. 6). Together, these remarks show a tension in participants' credibility judgments, as visual presentation could help news stand out in the feed, but if the format seemed mainly designed to capture immediate attention, it could also weaken credibility. This can be explained by Sundar's (2008) MAIN model, in which modality refers to how information is presented through text, images, video, audio, or a combination of these (p. 80). Sundar (2008) says that credibility is formed not only by what the content says, but also by how it is presented (pp. 80-82). A similar point appears in Chen et al.'s (2024) study, which found that visually rich short-video news does not automatically make them more credible, because such formats may attract attention, however they can also weaken perceptions of seriousness and professionalism (pp. 433-434).

Social cues added an additional layer to participants' credibility judgments. Participants noticed likes, comments, followers, verification badges, and who followed an account, but they did not treat these cues as automatically reliable. Olivia explained how she would assess the wider account context: "I would of course check the whole account, how many followers it has, if it posts always, of course the bio, and then I would also check the comments… So I kind of

check the credibility through other users also" (pp. 3-4). This shows that social cues were not only connected to likes or followers, but also to the wider social context around the account. Patricia also connected credibility to visible approval: "I find them credible because like I also see that like, for example, very famous people are following them like, and like just maybe in my brain, it's like, famous people would not trust, like, if it is like, false information" (p. 7). Similarly, she described verification badges as important: "..there's like also those blue ticks right next to the profile that like it says that it's verified.…Like if something is verified, like it makes it more true and makes it more credible" (Patricia, p. 11). Mia also said, "I think likes do influence me. I do pay attention to them" (p. 5). These examples show that popularity, verification, and endorsement could work as credibility shortcut.

However, participants also reflected critically regarding these cues. Olivia explained, "Maybe following how people comment, because sometimes I also know that a comments or like likes can be bought and can be automated. So if I see comments that are not really relevant or would not be a normal reaction from a person and might seem like a bot, I also look after that" (p. 6). Patricia similarly said, "Likes, yes. I read the comments, like especially if it is like about a post that like I really care about. I really want to learn more about a topic and like I want to see the kind of the, what's the other people like behind the screens are thinking about. But I don't know if comments would make, a source credible…" (p. 13). She added, "If the people writing the comments are not arguing or putting down their arguments, and they just write bad words, then I would maybe disregard the comments" (p. 14). This quote shows that participants viewed social cues more holistically: they could make a post or account appear more recognized, but they were not treated as direct proof of credibility. Participants also recognized that engagement could be manipulated or unreliable. In this way, social cues mattered, but they were not the main proof of credibility judgment. This is in line with van Dijck and Poell's (2013) understanding of popularity, in which visibility, ranking, and quantified engagement shape how content is valued (pp. 7-8). It is also consistent with Sundar's (2008) MAIN model, which suggests that interactive and social cues in digital environments can shape credibility judgments beyond the content itself (p. 78).

The personal relevance of the specific news post participants encountered shaped the attention they paid to the credibility cues in that post. However, personal relevance did not make a post credible by itself. Rather, it influenced whether participants stopped, opened, remembered,

or checked a post more carefully. Mariela explained that many of the things she reads begin with social media, but that she follows up differently depending on the topic: “First is what I read by myself and that I have to admit most of them start by some kind of nudge from social media. Then I usually continue looking through often Slovak pages if it's something related to my country because I'm very much in touch with the news from there. If it's not, then usually I opt for the BBC and similar pages to check further on them” (p. 1). Daniela similarly connected her interest in Danish politics to her own situation: “I am also interested in the political situation in Denmark because I have a passport situation that is currently affected by the government” (p. 2). These examples show that participants’ credibility assessment was affected by how close the topic felt to their own lives, whether through national background, current location, politics, or personal circumstances.

Therefore, verification appeared as selective rather than constant. Participants valued links, full articles, and confirmation from other sources, but they did not verify everything they encountered. Mariela explained, “Of course, I would double-check if it were information I wanted to use for something” (p. 4), and added, “If it were data-based, numerical, or something I wanted to use in an argument, I would double-check it” (p. 4). Albert similarly said, “It becomes more trustworthy if I can read more about it in other places, so Instagram is not the only place where the topic appears” (p. 12). Patricia also explained, “Like if I see, for example, the same thing also being reflected in another source, then I would actually completely think it is like true. Like once I confirm that it's not just like in a single profile, but like more profiles, like for more news sources, like talk about it” (p. 5). These examples show that participants relied on cross-source consistency, especially when the information felt important, uncertain, or useful.

This was also connected to whether the post made further checking possible. Emma said that if a post includes “more context, names, sources, or makes the information easier to find,” she trusts it much more (p. 6). Isabella similarly said, “I always check, like, who is posting this information and I really like when they also link to the full article” (p. 6). This shows that participants valued not only the information itself, but also the possibility of getting more information elsewhere. This can be explained by Sundar’s MAIN model, where navigability refers to how users move through digital information environments. In this case, links, full articles, and access to other sources supported credibility because they allowed participants to move beyond the Instagram post itself (Sundar, 2008, pp. 89-90).

Overall, this second theme shows that credibility assessments on Instagram were evaluated through a layered process. Participants relied on cues that were available in and around the post, such as the source, visual presentation, social signals, relevance, and possibilities for verification. These cues did not work separately, but they influenced one another. A familiar source could strengthen credibility, but this could also be weakened by an attention-seeking format. Comments could provide useful reactions, but could also be unreliable, and personal relevance could determine whether a post was checked further or simply scrolled past. The scrolling task showed how quickly participants could spot news within their feed, while the interview reflections showed how participants made sense of the news they spotted there.
At the same time, these credibility judgments were not only about whether a single Instagram post seemed believable. They also pointed to participants' expectations of journalism, such as the importance of recognizable sources, context, evidence, accuracy, and the possibility of checking information further. This leads to the third theme, which examines how participants' assessments of Instagram news relate to their trust in journalism on Instagram.

5.3 Theme 3: Trust in journalism on Instagram

In this third theme, the analysis brings together the previous two themes by looking into how participants' encounters with Instagram news and their cue-based credibility judgments related to their trust in journalism on the platform. It focuses on how these experiences shaped participants' understanding of Instagram as a space for journalism, and whether this made them trust journalism differently.

One way this relationship between Instagram news and trust appeared was in how participants described Instagram as an entry point into news. Several participants explained that Instagram was useful for becoming aware of something when it came to news, but not enough for fully understanding it. Emma expressed this when she said, "Instagram news, to an extent, is not fully real journalism. It is a format through which they share a little bit of the story" (p. 6). She also added, "There is often much more that the story holds that a small article, headline, image, or short description on Instagram cannot give you" (Emma, p. 6). Mariela made a similar point, "On Instagram, the information is boiled down a lot. In this specific case, there are only four lines written on Instagram, and then you need to go somewhere else to read more… If you

only get two or three facts about a complex issue, it can be difficult. So I think there is a big difference between the full article and the social media version" (pp. 4-5). Daniel also described Instagram as a first step rather than a place for deeper understanding: "...Instagram itself as a platform is not the place you need to look if you want to really learn about something. Maybe you can get like an initial approach... but then, yeah, if you want information, you need to aim a bit better" (p. 16). These reflections from participants show that Instagram often served as a starting point for getting news rather than a comprehensive source of news understanding.

Because Instagram was often seen as an entry point, the need to move beyond the post became important for trust. As shown in the previous theme, links, sources, and full articles worked as credibility cues because they helped participants check whether a post seemed reliable. In this theme, however, the need to move beyond the post shows that participants often trusted Instagram news more when it was embedded in fuller journalistic contexts outside the platform. Olivia expressed this when she said, "I feel like maybe going on the official website and someone has to be running the website and people are behind it makes it maybe more credible than just finding some news on Instagram that sometimes can be catchy, and I know that there is a lot of fake news going around on platforms like this. So, I'm careful" (p. 5). Emma also described Instagram news as different from fuller journalism: "They do feel different from real journalism because real journalism offers much more in-depth insights and many different perspectives. I feel like Instagram news is of course still done by journalists, especially if it is a platform like The New York Times, but it is different content" (p. 5). Together, these reflections show that participants did not simply lose trust in journalism on Instagram. Trust in platform-based news depended on whether it could be connected to recognizable journalistic work, provide a fuller context, and involve a broader reporting process. This connects especially to Kohring and Matthes' dimensions of trust, especially in the selectivity of facts, because participants trusted Instagram news more when the short post could be linked to a fuller context, sources, full articles, or a broader reporting process. It also relates to trust in the accuracy of depictions, as participants looked for official websites and recognizable journalistic sources to verify whether the information was reliable (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238–240).

Trust was also shaped by participants' previous experiences with news organizations. As shown in the previous theme, the source often worked as a credibility cue, but in relation to trust in journalism, it also represented something deeper, accumulated experience with a journalistic

institution. Mariela explained, “If I see something from a journal that I consider mostly neutral or aligned with values I see as right, based on what I have read from them over time, I take it more seriously” (p. 6). Olivia similarly said, “Some sources I know. So if it’s a source that is maybe well known in my country or online that they post news, that would make it credible” (p. 6). These examples show that trust was not only created in the moment of seeing a post. But it was shaped by participants' national media habits, and earlier experiences with journalism are reflected in their Instagram news assessments. A familiar source was trusted not simply because it was recognizable, but because it carried a history of perceived reliability.

And this leads us to how participants actually describe their trust in Instagram news. As written above, this had a few factors, such as something that depended on who was behind the content, how the information was presented, and whether the post provided enough transparency. Emma expressed this when she said, “I would say differently, because there is so much content and so much happening on the platform. It is hard to say that I trust it more. I trust it differently” (p. 7). Isabella made a similar point when she said, “So it really depends on who is behind the content and like how good the journalist is versus like what is the for what is the channel I would say yeah” (p. 11). Mariela also connected trust to transparency and sourcing: “If something feels like obvious propaganda or promotion of openly stated political values, I see it as information and as a perspective, but not necessarily as neutral or trustworthy. If I open a post and see no sources, no explanation of where the information comes from, who did it, or how it was done, I will not use it in my own thinking” (p. 6). These quotes show that participants could trust a source and still want more context and still check it elsewhere. They could use Instagram to stay informed while still seeing it as limited. Participants' trust in news on Instagram was therefore seen as conditional. Participants trusted what they saw, but also reflected on whether the post showed signs of accuracy, transparency, and connection to journalistic work. This relates to Kohring and Matthes’ dimensions of trust, especially accuracy of depictions, selectivity of facts, and journalistic assessment, because participants wanted the post to seem accurate, well-sourced, and connected to responsible journalism (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240).

Moreover, this shows how the Instagram environment shaped trust indirectly. As discussed in the first theme, news on Instagram appeared within a mixed, personalized, and algorithmic feed. As discussed in the second theme, participants responded to this environment by relying on cues surrounding the posts. In this third theme, these credibility judgments

addressed whether journalism can be trusted as journalism when it appears in platform-shaped formats. This leads to the conclusion that participants did not simply see Instagram news as either trustworthy or untrustworthy. Instead, their trust in journalism on Instagram was conditional. This means that trust depended on whether certain signs of journalism were present and easy to recognize. These signs were mainly connected to whether participants could check the information further. This could mean seeing the name of a journalist, seeing whether the post came from a journalistic source or news organization, or having the possibility to move from Instagram to a full article, official website, or another source.

This also connects back to the second theme, where participants reflected on different cues surrounding the post. These included source recognition, verification badges, who followed the account, visual presentation, comments, personal relevance, and verification options. However, participants were careful with these judgments because, as shown in the first theme, they encountered news in a mixed Instagram environment where journalism appeared alongside entertainment, personal content, influencer posts, and algorithmically recommended content. Therefore, Instagram was often seen as an entry point into news rather than as an official source from a journalistic organization. This shows that Instagram did not simply weaken trust in journalism, but also made trust depend on whether platform-based news could be recognized within the platform and further checked.

6. Discussion

The aim of this section is to answer the problem formulation by discussing how the findings of this study relate to the theoretical framework chosen for the thesis. It also considers how the analysis contributes to existing literature on Instagram news, credibility, and trust in journalism. Lastly, this section also reflects on the methodological limitations of the project and outlines possible directions for future research.

This study examined how international master's students in Denmark aged 20-30 assess the credibility of platform-based news on Instagram through different cues and how these assessments relate to their trust in journalism on this platform. The main finding in this study is that participants did not assess Instagram news through a single credibility assessment; instead, they used a combination of visible cues around the post, platform, and previous source knowledge opportunities for further verification. Instagram was also experienced as an entry point into news, as it was often not a space with sufficient depth for deeper news understanding. This helps answer the problem formulation by showing that participants' trust in journalism on Instagram was conditional. As they did not simply trust or distrust journalism because it appeared on Instagram. They trusted journalistic content when it was connected to news organizations, clear sourcing, links to fuller articles, and signs of accuracy or transparency.

These findings could not be fully understood without the theoretical framework used in this thesis. Sundar's MAIN model helped explain how participants assessed credibility through different cues around news encountered on Instagram. Sundar (2008) argues that credibility judgments in digital media are often shaped by technological affordances and cues, which can trigger heuristics (pp. 73-78). This was visible in the analysis when participants relied on different cues within the platform context. Saunder (2008) categorizes them into 4 different areas, which are modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability (pp.78-79). However, the findings also show that the MAIN model was most useful when understood in relation to Instagram's platform environment, because the cues participants relied on were shaped by how news appears on Instagram. For example, agency cues were important because participants wanted to know who was behind a post, so the source appears as a profile, with followers, verification, posting history, and social context (Sounder, 2008, pp. 83-85). Similarly, modality cues helped explain how participants saw the visual presentation of the post. So, whether they saw the post as professional or as something that would grab their attention. (Sounder, 2008, pp.

80-82). Interactivity cues were also relevant because participants paid attention to likes, comments, sharing, and the way users can interact with posts. This shaped how participants interpreted the social visibility and credibility of news content (Sundar, 2008, pp. 85-89). Navigability cues were relevant when participants valued the possibility of moving beyond the Instagram post through links or sources to full articles. (Sundar, 2008, pp. 89-92).

However, the MAIN model alone does not fully explain why these cues mattered on Instagram. The cues participants relied on were shaped by the platform environment itself. For example, the source appeared as an Instagram profile, visual credibility was judged through images, videos, and design, and social cues were visible through likes, comments, followers, and verification badges. Therefore, Sundar's model was useful for understanding the cues participants relied on, but it worked best when combined with attention to Instagram as the platform where these cues appeared.

This is where van Dijck and Poell's concept of social media logic took a role. Their concept helps explain how Instagram is not a neutral place for news, but a platform environment that structures how information, news, and communication are shown there (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). The findings in this study support this argument because, as explained in the first theme, participants' encounters with news were shaped by personalization, engagement, algorithms, and the mixing of news with other forms of content. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) describe social media logic through four key elements: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (p. 5). Programmability was relevant in this study when participants described algorithmic personalization and the feeling that Instagram knows what they are interested in (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 5-6). Popularity was relevant when participants looked at accounts through followers, likes, verification, or wider social recognition (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6-8). Connectivity and datafication were also present, but in the background, as participants understood that their feeds were shaped by follows, interactions, interests, and previous platform activity (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 8-10).

Van Dijck and Poell's concept of social media logic helps explain why the Instagram platform itself mattered for participants' credibility judgments. They argue that social media platforms shape how information, news, and communication are processed and circulated (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5). In this study, this was experienced by a mixed Instagram feed, algorithmic content, and the way serious news appeared next to entertainment and personal

posts. This affected how participants understood whether something counted as journalism, and how they judged the post's credibility. In this way, the findings show that the social media logic concept becomes part of participants' credibility judgments on Instagram.

Furthermore, Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust also helps explain the relationship between credibility judgments, how participants experience news on the platforms, and trust in journalism. Their model argues that trust in news media involves several dimensions, such as trust in the selectivity of topics, trust in the selectivity of facts, trust in the accuracy of depictions, and trust in journalistic assessment (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240). The findings show that participants' trust in Instagram news was especially connected to the selectivity of facts and the accuracy of depictions. Trust in the selectivity of facts was visible when participants could access fuller context, sources, names, links, official websites, or full articles; this related to the selectivity of facts (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240). Trust in the accuracy of depictions was also relevant because these features helped participants judge whether the information seemed reliable and possible to verify. This shows that participants looked beyond the post itself and considered whether it was connected to careful journalistic work (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238-240).

The findings also show that participants trusted journalism on Instagram more when they could connect a source with responsible reporting and reliability. Familiar news organizations were trusted because participants had previous experience with them and therefore connected them with reliability over time. This supports Kohring and Matthes' argument that trust in news media involves accepting journalistic selectivity under conditions in which audiences cannot verify everything themselves (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, pp. 238–240). However, Instagram complicates this model because participants were not always assessing "news media" in a clear institutional form. They were often assessing journalism as it appeared through platform-specific formats, profiles, short captions, reels, links, and reposted content.

Moreover, this study contributes to existing research showing that Instagram creates a hybrid information environment where news appears alongside entertainment, personal content, advertising, misinformation, and creator content (Swart & Broersma, 2024, pp. 1620-1622). The present study supports this point and adds that this mixed environment also affects how users react to news. As some participants described in their interviews, they noticed news sometimes

appearing between friends' stories, DIY content, and travel videos. This could make news feel out of place and easier to ignore.

The study also contributes to existing literature on platform-native journalism and everyday news encounters. Hendrickx (2023) shows how journalism can be created specifically for social media platforms, rather than only distributed through news organizations' own channels (pp. 1810-1811). Hendrickx (2025) further shows that young adults often encounter news on platforms such as Instagram incidentally, as part of everyday scrolling rather than direct news-seeking (pp. 5743-5744). The present study supports these points by showing that participants often experienced Instagram as a place where news appeared as part of ordinary platform use. However, it also adds that these encounters required participants to make quick credibility judgments in the moment, based on cues such as the profile behind the post, source familiarity, visual presentation, engagement signals, links, and the possibility of checking the information elsewhere.

The findings also contribute to research on verification processes when it comes to news on Instagram. Participants in this study valued cross-source verification, links, and the possibility of checking information elsewhere. But at the same time, they did not verify everything they encountered, so verification was selective and depended on whether the information felt important or uncertain. This relates to Gehrke et al.'s (2025) discussion of internal and external authentication of the news posts, where users first rely on their own judgment, followed by the source, and then the message of the post itself, and only move to external links when these are not enough (pp. 1508-1509). Gehrke et al. also found that young adults rarely complete a full two-step authentication process when checking news on social media (p. 1518). The present study also adds that selective verification does not necessarily mean a lack of critical awareness. Rather, it shows that users choose when to verify information in a platform environment where checking every post would be unrealistic.

Finally, this study adds to research on news credibility and trust in social media environments. Gehrke et al. (2025) found that reputation is an important shortcut for young adults in Denmark when authenticating news on social media (pp. 1504, 1518). In the present study, participants similarly brought previous trust in familiar news organizations into their Instagram assessments. However, a known news organization could increase credibility, but

participants still looked for signs of context, transparency, accuracy, and connection to journalistic work before trusting Instagram news more fully.

After discussing how the theoretical framework and literature review connect to the findings of this thesis, the study also opens up possibilities for future research. Since this thesis used a cross-sectional design, it only captured participants' experiences at one point in time. The scrolling task provided insight into participants' encounters with news at a specific point in time in their own feeds, but it did not show how these encounters might change over time. Future research could therefore extend this study by using a longer-term, longitudinal design. And that could be done by digital diaries, repeated scrolling tasks, or follow-up interviews. This would make it possible to examine how participants' Instagram feeds develop over time, and whether repeated exposure to certain topics, sources, or formats affects credibility judgments and their trust. This was not possible in the present study due to time constraints. However, such an approach could add further depth to the findings by showing how credibility assessment works as an ongoing, everyday practice, rather than only as a reflection captured during one interview setting.

As mentioned in the methodology section, this study is based on 10 participants. While this made qualitative insights into participants' experiences and meaning-making rich, it also limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to all international master's students or Instagram users. However, the aim of the study was not statistical generalization, but to understand in depth how participants encounter, assess, and make sense of platform-based news on Instagram. The scrolling task also has limitations, as it captured only a brief moment of participants' Instagram use. Even though it provided useful insight into how participants encountered and reacted to news in their own feeds, it did not show how this might change over time.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore how international master's students in Denmark assess the credibility of platform-based news on Instagram, which cues they rely on, and how these assessments relate to their trust in journalism as it appears on the platform. To do so, the study used semi-structured interviews to collect data, extended by a scrolling task through which participants showed their real-time encounters with news on Instagram (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 14). The data were analyzed through data-driven coding and reflexive thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2018, p. 61; Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 4-5).

In the analysis, the study found that participants did not assess the credibility of Instagram news through a single judgment. Instead, participants' credibility judgment was shaped by different cues such as profile recognition, visual presentation, social cues, and possibilities for verification. Instagram was also experienced as an entry point into news, because participants used it to become aware of topics, but often needed more context, sources, or fuller articles before trusting the information more fully. Overall, the study found that participants trusted journalism on Instagram but only under certain conditions. Their trust depended on whether the platform-based news could still be connected to known news organizations, clear sourcing, accuracy, transparency, and fuller articles.

Finally, as discussed in the previous section, the theoretical frameworks: The MAIN model (Sundar, 2008), the multidimensional model of trust in news media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), and the social media logic framework (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) helped explain how Instagram's platform logic shaped news encounters, how participants relied on credibility cues, and how these judgments related to trust in journalism as it appears on the platform. Future research could build on this study by using these theories, but a more longitudinal study with a bigger and more diverse participant group would be ideal.

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix A - Interview guide

Semi-structured interview guide

Introduction: Introduction to the interview and its purpose
Hi [Name], Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin, is it okay if I record and transcribe the interview? The recording will only be used for my master's thesis, and everything will be handled confidentially. I am currently studying a Master's in Culture, Communication and Globalization at Aalborg University. For my master's thesis, I am exploring how international master's students in Denmark encounter news on Instagram, how they assess whether it seems credible, and how these everyday experiences relate to their broader trust in journalism. The interview will be divided into a few parts. First, I will ask some general questions about you and your use of Instagram. Then, I will ask you to scroll on Instagram as you normally would and describe what you notice. After that, we will talk more in depth about how you evaluate news and what influences your impressions. I am interested in your experiences and perspectives, so there are no right or wrong answers. If anything feels unclear, or if you would prefer not to answer a question, you are welcome to skip it. Your name and any other sensitive information will be anonymized in the final thesis. The recording and transcript will be stored securely and used only for this project. Before we begin, do you feel comfortable continuing?

First Part: Getting the participant to talk

- Can you briefly tell me about yourself? (e.g., what you study, how long you've been in Denmark, where you're originally from, what is your age)
- Where do you most often consume your news from?
- How would you describe your everyday use of Instagram, including what you mainly use it for? (e.g., entertainment, keeping up with people, information, something else)
- How often do you come across news or news-like content on Instgram and does it usually happen intentionally or by chance?
- What kind of news do you typically come across?
- Would you say the news you see is mostly local, national, or international?

Second Part: Instagram scrolling part

Introduction to task

I would now like to ask you to open Instagram and scroll as you normally would for around 2–3 minutes. As you scroll, please say out loud what you notice, especially if you come across anything you would consider news or news-like content. I may ask a few short follow-up questions while you scroll.

Possible prompts during the task

- What are you noticing right now?
- Would you describe this as news, or not? Why?
- What made this stand out to you?
    - Is there anything about the account, visuals, or engagement that affects how you see it?
- What makes this seem credible or not credible to you?
- Would you continue watching or reading this, or would you scroll past it? Why?
- If you saw this somewhere other than Instagram, do you think you would react differently?

Purpose: This task is useful because it prompts participants to reflect on real content in context rather than speaking only in general terms. It also helps reveal how participants recognize news, what they notice first, and which cues shape immediate credibility judgments.	
Thirs Part: Follow-up questions on news on Instagram	
Now that we have looked at how you normally encounter content on Instagram, I would like to ask you some follow-up questions about how you experience news there, what shapes your impressions, and how you think about it more broadly.	
Theory	**Interview questions:**
van Dijck and Poell's social media logic framework	● Does news on Instagram feel different compared to traditional news platforms? how? ● Do you think the fact that something appears on Instagram affects how you evaluate it? ● Do you feel that Instagram influences what you notice or pay attention to? ● Do you feel that some types of content are shown more often than others? ● Do you feel Instagram mixes news with entertainment or personal content in a way that affects how seriously you take it?
Sundar's MAIN model	● When you come across news on Instagram, what usually makes it seem credible or not credible to you? ● Is this usually a quick, intuitive feeling, or something you reflect on more carefully?

	• Does it matter whether the post comes from a news outlet, journalist, influencer, activist, or ordinary user? • How much do visuals or format, such as reels, stories, images, or text, affect whether something seems credible? • Do likes, comments, shares, or views influence how credible something seems? • Are you more likely to find a post credible if it includes context, names sources, or makes it easy to find more information?
Kohring and Matthes' multidimensional model of trust in news media	• Do you feel that Instagram shows the most important topics, or only certain types of content? • Do you ever feel that something important is missing? (for example background, context, or key facts) • Do you think some parts of a story get more attention than others? (for example the most dramatic part, one side of the issue, or a specific detail) • Are there certain news organizations you generally trust, even on Instagram? • Would you say news on Instagram feels like "real journalism"? Why or why not? • Overall, does Instagram make you trust news more, less, or differently?
Conclusion:	

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Do you have any questions about the interview or the project?

You are welcome to contact us if you have any questions or think of any additional information. Thank you so much for your time - I really appreciate your participation.

10.2 Appendix B - Consent form

Consent for the Processing of Personal Data
Master thesis project, Culture, Communication & Globalization at Aalborg University

Consent Form

1. I have been informed about the aim and scope of the research project.
2. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and receive additional information before agreeing to participate.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
4. I have been informed that the interview will be used only for the purpose of this research project.
5. I understand that my personal data will be treated confidentially and stored securely.
6. I understand that my name and other identifying information will be anonymized in the thesis.
7. I understand that anonymized interview material, such as short quotations, may be included in the final thesis.
8. I have been informed that I may request access to my data and ask for it to be corrected or deleted, where this is possible.

I consent to:

- my data being processed for the purpose of this master's thesis project;
- my data being accessed by the student researcher responsible for the project;
- my data being shared with Aalborg University, including the supervisor and, if relevant, an external examiner, as part of supervision and assessment;
- anonymized parts of the interview material, such as selected quotations, being included in the final thesis;
- the final thesis being published or made available in anonymized form, meaning that my name and identifying information will not be included.

Consent may be withdrawn at any time with future effect by contacting the following email address: evie.lasova@gmail.com

Interview Participant:

Date:

Name:

Signature:

Student Responsible for Data in Connection with this Interview:

Date:

Name:

Signature:

10.3 Appendix C - Recruitment message for interview participants

Hi [Name],

I hope you are well. I am currently writing my master's thesis at Aalborg University about how international master's students in Denmark assess the credibility of platform-based news on Instagram.

For this study, I am looking for international master's students aged 20-30 who use Instagram and sometimes encounter news or news-related content there. The interview would take around 45-60 minutes and would be conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

During the interview, I would ask you some questions about your Instagram news use and credibility assessments. There would also be a short scrolling task, where you would scroll through your own Instagram feed for a few minutes and talk about what you notice. You would not need to prepare anything in advance.

Participation is voluntary, and the interview would be anonymised and used only for my thesis. I would also send you a consent form before the interview so you have all the information in advance.

Please let me know if you would be interested in participating or if you have any questions.

Best,
Eva Lasova