



International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Operating Publisher
SciFormat Publishing Inc.
ISNI: 0000 0005 1449 8214

2734 17 Avenue SW,
Calgary, Alberta, T3E0A7,
Canada
+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

ARTICLE TITLE ALGORITHMIC FEEDS, MISINFORMATION, AND CIVIC TRUST
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MEDIA INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

DOI [https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1\(49\).2026.5344](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1(49).2026.5344)

RECEIVED 21 January 2026

ACCEPTED 10 March 2026

PUBLISHED 18 March 2026

LICENSE



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ALGORITHMIC FEEDS, MISINFORMATION, AND CIVIC TRUST AMONG YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS: A REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

Wiktor Czyżewski (Corresponding Author, Email: wiktor1107@onet.pl)

Independent Public Health Care Institution of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration in Kielce named after St. John Paul II, Kielce, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-0277-8203

Michał Babicz

Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce, Świętokrzyskie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-7611-4695

Kamil Chudzicki

Voivodship Hospital in Kielce, Kielce, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-2734-7720

Agata Słoma

University Clinical Center, Gdańsk, Pomerania, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-6807-7706

Katarzyna Rosa

University Clinical Center, Gdańsk, Pomerania, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0005-9307-4774

Dominik Szydelko

Voivodship Hospital in Kielce, Kielce, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-9907-858X

Martyna Szymczyk

Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce, Świętokrzyskie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0005-0772-7119

Paweł Żurek

Medical University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0006-3023-5128

Anna Szot

Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce, Świętokrzyskie, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-2613-1068

Jagoda Pałubska

Independent Public Health Care Institution of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration in Kielce named after St. John Paul II, Kielce, Poland

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-3833-7977

ABSTRACT

This review examines how algorithmically curated social media environments shape misinformation exposure and civic trust among youth and young adults. The reviewed literature spans longitudinal surveys, field experiments, behavioral tracking, qualitative interviews, review papers, and conceptual studies. Taken together, it shows that the civic consequences of social media are not determined by platform use alone. They depend on the interaction of ranking logics, peer networks, source credibility, corrective infrastructures, and the developmental needs of younger users. Three major patterns emerge. First, engagement-driven and homophilous information environments intensify selective exposure and support the diffusion of misinformation, especially when content is emotionally charged, identity-affirming, and repeatedly encountered within tightly clustered networks. Second, exposure to verified and professionally produced news on social platforms can improve current affairs knowledge, belief accuracy, and trust in news under specific conditions. Third, youth and young adults experience social media as both a civic resource and a civic risk: it supports belonging, sociopolitical learning, digital organizing, and collective action, yet it can also heighten institutional distrust, vicarious trauma, harassment, burnout, and radicalization pressures. The review argues that civic trust is best understood as a dynamic outcome of social media information environments rather than a simple by-product of platform use. It concludes that democratic resilience among younger publics is more likely when platforms reward informational quality and context, when institutions communicate credibly, and when youth-centered media literacy supports critical but constructive participation.

KEYWORDS

Algorithmic Feeds, Misinformation, Civic Trust, Youth, Young Adults, Social Media

CITATION

Wiktor Czyżewski, Michał Babicz, Kamil Chudzicki, Agata Słoma, Katarzyna Rosa, Dominik Szydelko, Martyna Szymczyk, Paweł Żurek, Anna Szot, Jagoda Pałubska. (2026) Algorithmic Feeds, Misinformation, and Civic Trust Among Youth and Young Adults: A Review of Social Media Information Environments. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(49). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(49).2026.5344

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms now function as major infrastructures of public life. For youth and young adults in particular, they are not only channels for communication and entertainment, but also spaces where political information is encountered, interpreted, discussed, and acted upon. Young people use these platforms to follow breaking events, share resources, express identities, learn civic vocabularies, and coordinate participation in campaigns, protests, and mutual aid. Because these practices are embedded in everyday digital routines, the civic consequences of social media reach far beyond conventional media effects. They shape what younger citizens know, what they believe, who they trust, and how they imagine their place within democratic life (Callahan et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

At the same time, the public debate around social media has become increasingly concerned with misinformation, polarization, and declining confidence in institutions. Much of this concern is directed at algorithmic feeds. Unlike earlier mass media systems, social media do not simply distribute the same news to broad audiences. They rank, personalize, amplify, and repeat content according to engagement signals, network structure, and inferred relevance. As a result, users encounter very different information environments even when they use the same platform. What matters is not only whether a person uses Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, or X, but also what kinds of posts, accounts, stories, and recommendations are made visible within those spaces (Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025; Rastogi & Bansal, 2022; West & Bergstrom, 2021).

This distinction is crucial for understanding civic trust. In this review, civic trust refers broadly to confidence in the credibility of news, the fairness of democratic procedures, and the legitimacy of public institutions. The literature examined here also makes clear that civic trust is not a single, uniform construct. Trust in news, political trust, trust in government, trust in elections, and trust in public institutions often move together, but they are not identical. A user may distrust mainstream media while remaining committed to democratic participation, or may feel alienated from political institutions while relying strongly on peer

networks and community-based information. For this reason, a useful review must treat civic trust as layered and dynamic rather than as a simple attitude that rises or falls in response to social media exposure (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

The reviewed evidence also suggests that the democratic effects of social media are not uniformly negative. Some studies show that selective exposure, emotionally charged content, homophilous sharing networks, and misinformation about institutions can weaken shared reality and deepen cynicism. Other studies show that following verified news accounts on social platforms can improve current affairs knowledge, strengthen belief accuracy, and increase trust in news. Still others reveal that younger users treat social media as vital civic spaces for belonging, political learning, identity formation, and collective action, especially when traditional institutions feel distant or exclusionary. This mixed evidence creates a core puzzle: under what conditions do social media feeds erode civic trust, and under what conditions can they support democratic resilience (Altay et al., 2025; Callahan et al., 2024; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Wilf et al., 2023)?

Answering this question is especially important for youth and young adults. This population is developmentally positioned at the intersection of identity formation, peer influence, symbolic politics, and emerging citizenship. Their reliance on digital platforms for news, connection, and self-expression makes them particularly sensitive to the structure of social media information environments. Yet the literature directly linking algorithmic feeds, misinformation, and civic trust among younger users remains fragmented across political communication, sociology, psychology, youth studies, and media studies. Some work focuses on diffusion and echo chambers, some on trust in news, some on youth activism, and some on platform design or corrective interventions (Callahan et al., 2024; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

This article addresses that fragmentation through a structured review of the literature. Rather than treating platform use as a single variable, it examines how algorithmic curation, misinformation dynamics, source credibility, and youth civic development interact. The review asks four questions. First, how do algorithmically shaped information environments affect the conditions under which misinformation spreads? Second, how does misinformation influence trust in news, institutions, and democratic procedures? Third, when can social media news exposure strengthen rather than weaken civic trust? Fourth, which design and intervention strategies appear most promising for improving democratic resilience among youth and young adults?

The central argument advanced here is that social media do not have one civic effect. Their consequences depend on the interaction between exposure structures, trust relationships, and the social location of users. Engagement-maximizing feeds, dense homophilous networks, and repeated exposure to falsehoods can undermine civic trust. Yet intentional news seeking, verified journalistic content, contextual fact-checking, and community-based civic learning can support more accurate beliefs and more resilient forms of democratic participation. Understanding both pathways is essential for evaluating the social role of platform technologies.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a structured narrative review design with integrative aims. The working corpus was assembled in two rounds of targeted article collection centered on social media, misinformation, trust, civic participation, youth development, and algorithmic curation. Searches privileged PubMed-indexed or PubMed-linked full texts and were supplemented by linked full-text retrieval when a study was clearly relevant but conceptually adjacent. Because the direct literature connecting all parts of the topic is limited, the review deliberately brought together adjacent strands of evidence rather than restricting itself to studies that used the exact phrase civic trust.

Studies were prioritized when they addressed at least one of the following domains: (1) misinformation exposure, diffusion, or correction on social media; (2) trust in news, political institutions, or electoral processes; (3) youth or young adult civic engagement, sociopolitical development, or identity formation; and (4) platform design, content recommendation, or algorithmic curation with implications for democratic discourse. Quantitative, qualitative, experimental, panel, tracking-based, and review studies were all considered relevant when they illuminated one or more parts of the conceptual chain from information environment to belief formation and trust.

Across the two collection rounds, 20 PDFs were initially assembled. After removing duplicates and excluding papers whose primary focus was health-specific misinformation without meaningful implications for civic trust, 14 focal sources were retained for close synthesis. These studies spanned political communication, youth studies, sociology, psychology, and platform-governance research, making the corpus suitable for an integrative review of a cross-disciplinary question.

The final corpus was heterogeneous by design. It included a three-wave panel study of political trust among young people in Hong Kong, a behavioral-tracking and survey study of electoral misinformation during the Brazilian presidential election, a preregistered field experiment on following news accounts on Instagram and WhatsApp in France and Germany, qualitative studies of marginalized youth organizers and immigrant-origin young adults in the United States, a large survey of young Filipino netizens, a classic network analysis of misinformation diffusion in online communities, and conceptual work on recommendation algorithms and healthy civic discourse. Review papers on youth civic development and fake news mechanisms were also used to identify broader patterns that individual empirical studies alone could not fully explain (Altay et al., 2025; Beauvais, 2022; Callahan et al., 2024; Dayrit et al., 2022; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Drolsbach et al., 2024; Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

The analysis proceeded through thematic coding rather than statistical aggregation. Each article was read for five analytic questions: What kind of information environment is being described? What mechanism of misinformation or belief formation is emphasized? What form of trust or distrust is examined? How are youth or young adults positioned within the analysis? What intervention, design implication, or corrective mechanism is proposed? Based on this coding, the literature was synthesized into six thematic domains: algorithmic curation and exposure structure; echo chambers and misinformation diffusion; source credibility and trust in news; youth civic development and belonging; civic risk and institutional distrust; and corrective interventions and healthier information environments.

This approach has several advantages for the present topic. First, it allows the review to connect literatures that are often separated by discipline, method, or policy focus. Second, it makes it possible to compare studies that examine different outcomes but share a common underlying mechanism, such as selective exposure or contextual correction. Third, it is better suited than a narrowly bounded systematic review to a topic whose key concepts are distributed across adjacent fields and not always labeled consistently.

The approach also has limitations. The reviewed studies vary substantially in context, platform, age range, and operationalization of trust. Some focus directly on youth and young adults, while others provide general evidence on platform dynamics that must be interpreted for younger populations. Not all studies isolate algorithmic ranking effects experimentally, and the distinction between platform affordances, network practices, and recommendation systems is not always analytically clear. For these reasons, the review does not claim a single causal estimate. Instead, it offers a structured synthesis designed to identify robust patterns, tensions, and implications for future research and practice.

Table 1. Characteristics of the reviewed evidence base

Evidence block	Design	Sample/context	Main variables	Core contribution to this review
Hong Kong youth panel study	Three-wave cross-lagged survey	N=216; ages 16–24	Personal social media network news; political trust	Intentional news obtained through friends and family slightly improved political trust.
Brazilian election tracking-panel study	Behavioral tracking plus four-wave panel survey	2,200 internet users; 42 million clicks	Legacy news use; trust in news; electoral misinformation	Legacy news exposure was linked to lower belief in electoral misinformation, and trust in news strengthened the protective effect.
France/Germany social-media news experiment	Preregistered two-wave field experiment	N=3,395; 2-week intervention	Instagram/WhatsApp news following; knowledge; belief accuracy; trust	Following verified news accounts increased current affairs knowledge, belief accuracy, and trust in news without increasing affective polarization.
U.S. community fact-checking experiment	Randomized experiment with misleading and nonmisleading posts	N=1,810 plus supplementary N=675	Community notes; warning flags; trust in fact-checking	Context-rich community notes were trusted more than simple warning flags and improved discernment.

Evidence block	Design	Sample/context	Main variables	Core contribution to this review
Youth civic development review	Integrative/review article	Multi-study review	Belonging; civic engagement; misinformation; wellbeing	Social media functioned as a site of civic learning, mutual aid, and identity work, but also exposed youth to misinformation, racism, trauma, and radicalization risks.
Marginalized adolescent organizers study	Qualitative interviews	n=11; ages 14–19	Sociopolitical development; institutional trust; collective identity	Social media intensified learning and agency while also reducing trust in political institutions and contributing to burnout.
Immigrant-origin Latiné young adult study	Qualitative interviews	n=39	Belonging; verification; misinformation; civic identity	Participants used social media to build belonging, vet information, and protect their communities from misinformation framed as a threat to democracy.
Online civic engagement study	Qualitative interviews	n=20; ages 16–21	Restorying; community building; collective action	Youth used social media for narrative reframing, emotional support, community formation, and collective action.
Filipino netizens survey	Cross-sectional survey	N=1,090	Social media competence; political participation in gender issues	Content generation competence predicted all forms of social media political participation examined.
Misinformation diffusion study	Large-scale network analysis	Large online sharing networks	Homophily; echo chambers; cascade dynamics	Social homogeneity was a primary driver of misinformation diffusion, with content remaining inside polarized clusters.
Recommendation design perspective	Conceptual/policy analysis	Platform-level framework	Civic discourse metrics; ranking design	Alternative recommendation systems should optimize for relevance, quality, reliability, diversity, and low toxicity rather than engagement alone.

3. Results

3.1. Algorithmic curation and the architecture of exposure

Social media use should not be treated as a single exposure. Platforms create information environments, and those environments are shaped by ranking systems, engagement incentives, network composition, platform affordances, and user intent. The reviewed literature repeatedly shows that outcomes depend less on raw time spent online than on what kinds of content become visible, repeated, and salient within a feed (Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025; Rastogi & Bansal, 2022).

This point is especially important for the phrase algorithmic feeds. In everyday debate, the term often refers to recommendation systems that personalize content based on prior engagement. In practice, however, algorithmic influence is broader. It includes ranking logic, repost amplification, notifications, account suggestions, discoverability features, and the visibility advantages granted to some forms of content over others. As a result, users do not merely choose from a neutral information marketplace. Their available choices are already curated (Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025).

Conceptual work on healthier recommendation systems argues that current platform logics define relevance primarily through engagement. This creates a mismatch between what platforms optimize and what democratic discourse requires. When engagement serves as the dominant sorting rule, content that is

emotionally provocative, identity-confirming, conflict-driven, or sensational may gain disproportionate visibility. In such settings, users can be steered toward information diets that are not necessarily reliable, diverse, or civically useful. By contrast, a civic-discourse approach to recommendation design suggests that feeds could instead be assessed through dimensions such as relevance to public issues, informational quality, reliability, diversity of perspectives, civility, and toxicity (Lasser & Poechhacker, 2025).

The empirical literature reviewed here supports the importance of this distinction. A youth panel study from Hong Kong found that intentional news consumption through one's personal social media network was positively associated with political trust, even after accounting for other media channels and prior political interest. This finding suggests that algorithmically mediated environments do not operate in a uniform way. When social media are used intentionally to access news circulating through trusted peer networks, exposure may become more reflective and socially meaningful rather than purely passive (Zhang et al., 2023).

This observation helps clarify a recurring tension in the literature. General accounts of platform harm are often correct about engagement-driven visibility and algorithmic amplification, but they can overlook the fact that younger users are not only passive recipients of feed content. They also actively follow accounts, curate their own networks, join communities, and decide when to engage with professional news or corrective information. The civic significance of algorithmic feeds therefore lies in the interaction between platform logic and user practice. Feeds shape the menu of visible content, but trust outcomes depend on what users seek, what they encounter, and which sources they consider credible (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Taken together, the literature suggests a useful starting point for the rest of the review: social media feeds matter not because they deterministically manufacture beliefs, but because they structure the probability that certain beliefs, identities, and forms of trust will be reinforced. This is why research on misinformation, trust, and youth civic life must move from platform use in general to information environments in particular.

3.2. Echo chambers, selective exposure, and misinformation diffusion

One of the clearest patterns in the literature is that misinformation spreads most effectively in socially homogeneous environments. Large-scale analyses of online diffusion show that users tend to consume and share content aligned with familiar narratives while ignoring incongruent information. These behaviors produce clusters in which content travels primarily among people with similar preferences, identities, or political orientations. In these clusters, repetition functions as a credibility cue. False claims become more persuasive not because they are necessarily well evidenced, but because they appear familiar, socially validated, and emotionally resonant (Beauvais, 2022; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

This pattern is often described through the language of echo chambers, homophily, and selective exposure. Although these terms are not identical, they point to a common process. Users sort into networks where they repeatedly encounter congruent viewpoints, and these network structures shape what becomes believable. The reviewed misinformation diffusion research identifies social homogeneity as a primary driver of content spread. Information often remains within highly polarized communities, and content sharing tends to follow homogeneous rather than cross-cutting paths. In such settings, the corrective potential of diversity is weak because contradictory information is less likely to enter the network in trusted form (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Rastogi & Bansal, 2022).

Review work on fake news mechanisms helps explain why this happens. False or misleading content often leverages emotional arousal, novelty, and confirmation bias. It can appear in familiar social-media formats, mimic authoritative sources, or repackage existing stories into highly shareable frames. Belief is further facilitated when digital literacy is low, when users rely on quick heuristics rather than verification, or when they are already predisposed to distrust mainstream institutions. As a result, misinformation is rarely just a problem of false facts. It is also a problem of narrative fit, social identity, and platform incentives (Beauvais, 2022; Rastogi & Bansal, 2022).

These mechanisms matter for civic trust because much misinformation targets institutions rather than isolated events. Claims about manipulated elections, corrupt public agencies, illegitimate authorities, media conspiracies, or hidden agendas do not simply confuse users. They can weaken the shared assumptions required for democratic life. When users repeatedly encounter institution-targeting misinformation inside trusted peer networks, distrust can become self-reinforcing. Suspicion makes corrective information easier to dismiss, and repeated dismissal further strengthens the original suspicion (Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; West & Bergstrom, 2021).

The Brazilian election study in the reviewed corpus captures this dynamic well. It shows that belief in electoral misinformation is not just an information problem but a trust problem. The more users accept false claims about elections, the more fragile trust in news becomes. This is especially significant in periods of high political contention, when misinformation about voting procedures or institutional fairness can be mobilized strategically. In such contexts, social media information environments may influence democratic legitimacy not only by shaping opinions, but by shaping whether citizens believe the system itself is credible (Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

For youth and young adults, these processes may be even more consequential. Younger users often build political understanding while still forming stable habits of source evaluation. If their civic learning occurs in environments dominated by highly affective content, peer validation, and low-friction sharing, misinformation can become woven into identity and belonging. The result is not always immediate disengagement. Sometimes it produces the opposite: highly activated but distrustful participation, oriented more toward exposure, confrontation, or defensive identity work than toward institutional confidence (Callahan et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

3.3. Source credibility, verified news exposure, and trust

If misinformation spreads through homophily and repetition, what interrupts that process? A central answer in the reviewed literature is source credibility. Several studies show that exposure to verified or professionally produced news can improve both accuracy and trust, but only under specific conditions (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

The strongest evidence comes from a field experiment in France and Germany in which participants were asked to follow news organizations on Instagram and WhatsApp for two weeks. Compared with a control condition centered on non-news accounts, the intervention increased current affairs knowledge, awareness of true news stories, belief accuracy, and trust in the news. It did not increase affective polarization or merely create an inflated feeling of being informed. This distinction is crucial. The results indicate that when younger or digitally active users are intentionally connected to high-quality news within the environments they already inhabit, social media can become a channel for democratic learning rather than a source of distortion (Altay et al., 2025).

The Brazilian election study points in the same direction from another angle. During a highly contentious presidential campaign, exposure to legacy news brands was associated with lower belief in electoral misinformation over time. Trust in news strengthened this protective effect, whereas digital-born news and platform use in general showed null or inconsistent effects. At the same time, belief in electoral misinformation reduced trust in news, suggesting a reciprocal process. Trust in news operates both as a moderator and as an outcome: it helps users reject misinformation, but it can also be eroded by successful misinformation (Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

The Hong Kong youth panel study adds an important nuance. In that case, political trust was not most strongly shaped by official or mainstream channels. Instead, intentional news obtained through friends and family in personal social media networks had the most meaningful positive effect. This suggests that the path from social media to trust does not run only through institutional authority. It may also run through relational trust. When news reaches users via socially meaningful ties and is actively sought rather than passively encountered, it can support orientation rather than confusion (Zhang et al., 2023).

These findings help resolve an apparent contradiction in the broader debate. Social media news exposure is often treated as either harmful or beneficial. The reviewed literature indicates that both conclusions can be true depending on the type of exposure. Passive exposure to emotionally salient, socially validated, low-quality content may deepen confusion and cynicism. Intentional following of balanced, professional, or trusted news sources may increase knowledge and belief accuracy. The key question is not whether news is encountered on social media, but which news is encountered, how it is encountered, and what trust relations surround it (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

For civic trust, this means that social media can produce both virtuous and vicious cycles. In a virtuous cycle, verified exposure improves knowledge and discernment, which supports trust in news and strengthens democratic judgment. In a vicious cycle, misinformation undermines belief accuracy, which weakens trust in news and leaves users more vulnerable to future falsehoods. Youth and young adults may move between these cycles depending on platform design, network composition, and media literacy (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

3.4. Youth civic development, belonging, and participation

A second major strand of the literature shows that social media are not only information systems. For younger users, they are civic spaces. They enable belonging, identity exploration, sociopolitical learning, and forms of participation that do not fit older models of citizenship (Callahan et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

Review work on youth civic development during the pandemic describes social media as a central environment in which young people found community, gained critical awareness, learned movement vocabularies, and coordinated action when in-person spaces were restricted. Across different contexts, youth used social media to educate one another, participate in racial justice movements, engage in mutual aid, and support collective wellbeing. The civic significance of these practices lies not only in overt political expression, but in how they help young people understand themselves as members of communities with responsibilities, histories, and shared struggles (Wilf et al., 2023).

Qualitative studies deepen this picture. Interviews with marginalized adolescent organizers show that social media intensified sociopolitical learning, helped develop a stronger sense of collective identity, and shifted organizing toward digital strategies and mutual aid. At the same time, these young organizers reported decreased trust in mainstream political institutions. This combination is highly important. It suggests that lower institutional trust does not always indicate apathy. In some cases, it coexists with heightened agency, stronger issue commitment, and more sophisticated analyses of injustice (Malorni & Wilf, 2025).

A similar pattern appears in research on immigrant-origin young adults during the 2020 election cycle in the United States. Social media allowed participants to construct communities of belonging that were not reducible to physical place. They used these spaces to curate information, vet its veracity, disseminate resources, and protect their communities from harmful narratives. In this work, misinformation was described not merely as inaccurate content, but as a threat to democracy and to communal survival. Trust, therefore, was tied to social responsibility. Being an informed citizen meant learning how to evaluate and circulate information in ways that strengthened vulnerable communities (Callahan et al., 2024).

Another qualitative study of digitally active youth with historically marginalized identities identifies three recurring forms of online civic engagement: restorying, building community, and taking collective action. Restorying involved personal storytelling, reframing dominant narratives, and imagining more just futures. Building community involved emotional support, allyship, and network formation. Collective action involved organizing, mobilizing, and accountability practices. Together, these findings show that the civic life of youth on social media cannot be reduced to news consumption or misinformation exposure alone. Feeds also shape the symbolic resources through which young people narrate injustice, develop solidarities, and transform identity into action (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

Survey evidence supports the importance of digital competence in this process. Research with young Filipino netizens found that social media content generation was a strong positive predictor of multiple forms of political participation in gender issues. The study suggests that civic expression is facilitated not only by political interest or demographic traits, but by the practical ability to create, interpret, and circulate content. For younger users, participation depends partly on whether they can do meaningful work inside social-media environments (Dayrit et al., 2022).

These findings complicate any simplistic argument that social media merely replace conventional politics with distraction. For many young people, platforms serve as training grounds for civic identity. They teach vocabularies of justice, provide access to networks of care, and create routes into participation that are more immediate than formal institutions. At the same time, this form of civic development may be accompanied by scepticism toward traditional media and political elites. The reviewed literature therefore points to a shift from inherited trust to negotiated trust, built through community validation, verification practices, and lived relevance (Callahan et al., 2024; Dayrit et al., 2022; Wilf et al., 2023).

3.5. Civic risks for youth and young adults

The civic opportunities described above coexist with substantial risks. In the reviewed literature, youth and young adults repeatedly encounter misinformation, harassment, racism, vicarious trauma, burnout, and political disillusionment. These harms are not secondary. They shape whether social media strengthen or weaken democratic resilience (Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf et al., 2023; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

The review of youth civic development during the pandemic is particularly clear on this point. Social media supported learning and action, but also increased exposure to misinformation, radicalization, racism, and traumatic imagery. Young people engaged with urgent public issues while simultaneously carrying

unequal emotional burdens. This was especially true for racially minoritized youth, who faced both heightened online participation and intensified exposure to discriminatory content and collective trauma (Wilf et al., 2023).

Qualitative studies of youth organizers reinforce this concern. Marginalized adolescent organizers described a pendulum swing from intense activity to burnout as social media became central to their political lives. Increased access to information did not simply empower them; it also flooded them with crisis, conflict, and responsibility. In these accounts, platform visibility can feel double-edged. It enables recognition and mobilization, but also sustains pressure to respond continuously, perform conviction publicly, and remain exposed to hostility. This condition may weaken trust not only in institutions but also in the long-term efficacy of public engagement itself (Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

Another important risk is performative activism. Several youth studies suggest that young people are aware of the difference between visible posting and durable change. When platforms reward symbolic performance more than sustained organizing, users may become cynical about both digital participation and institutional response. In such environments, distrust is not always caused by misinformation alone. It may also arise from repeated experiences of shallow visibility, low accountability, and stalled structural change (Callahan et al., 2024; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

These findings call for a careful interpretation of civic trust. It would be simplistic to say that declining trust among younger users is always a democratic problem to be reversed. In some cases, distrust reflects a realistic assessment of exclusion, bias, or institutional failure. What matters is whether distrust becomes generalized and destabilizing, or whether it is transformed into critical engagement and collective agency. The reviewed literature suggests both pathways are possible. Social media can help youth develop critical consciousness and democratic participation, but it can also intensify alienation when information environments remain toxic, manipulative, or relentlessly crisis-driven (Callahan et al., 2024; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

This is why youth-centered analyses are indispensable. Younger users do not merely receive misinformation. They process it while building identities, testing values, and learning how public life works. The same feed can therefore function as a site of political socialization, emotional injury, and community formation at once. Any serious account of civic trust in the digital age must hold these realities together (Dayrit et al., 2022; Wilf et al., 2023).

3.6. Corrective interventions and healthier information environments

The final major theme in the reviewed literature concerns correction and design. If some information environments intensify misinformation and distrust, which interventions can create more trustworthy conditions?

The reviewed evidence suggests that context matters more than warning alone. In experimental work on community-based fact-checking, community notes were perceived as more trustworthy than simple misinformation flags across political groups. The core advantage of these notes was not merely who delivered them, but what they contained. Users were more likely to trust corrective interventions when they provided explanation and context rather than a bare label that a post was false or misleading. This finding is important because distrust in correction is often part of the broader distrust ecosystem surrounding misinformation. When a correction appears opaque, top-down, or decontextualized, it may trigger defensiveness rather than reflection. When it explains why a claim is misleading, trust and discernment improve (Drolsbach et al., 2024).

The literature on digital literacy points in a compatible direction. Users are less vulnerable when they can evaluate source credibility, recognize manipulative cues, and verify claims before sharing them. For youth and young adults, these skills are inseparable from civic education. Verification should not be framed only as a defensive media habit. It is also a form of democratic responsibility because it helps preserve a more reliable public sphere (Beauvais, 2022; Rastogi & Bansal, 2022).

At the platform level, conceptual work on recommendation systems suggests that healthier information environments require more than post hoc correction. Alternative ranking approaches could, in principle, optimize for democratic values rather than raw engagement. Proposals in the reviewed literature include bridging-based ranking that rewards content receiving positive engagement across diverse audiences, and intelligence-based ranking that prioritizes content likely to improve collective accuracy. Other work recommends evaluating feeds against dimensions such as relevance to public issues, informational quality, reliability, diversity, civility, and toxicity. The broader implication is that civic trust should be treated as an environmental property of information systems, not only as an individual disposition to be repaired after the fact (Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025).

At the same time, the literature warns against simple technological fixes. Chronological feeds do not necessarily reduce polarization. Cross-cutting exposure can backfire if it feels hostile or artificially imposed. Fact-checking may fail when users reject the legitimacy of the corrector. And even high-quality information is less effective when institutions themselves communicate slowly, opaquely, or without regard for the communities most affected by a public issue. For this reason, healthier information environments require coordination across platform design, journalism, education, and public communication (Drolsbach et al., 2024; Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025; West & Bergstrom, 2021).

For youth and young adults, especially, interventions should not treat misinformation only as a cognitive error. It is also a social and developmental challenge. The most promising responses are therefore those that combine credible information, contextual correction, relational trust, and spaces for constructive participation (Callahan et al., 2024; Dayrit et al., 2022; Wilf et al., 2023).

Table 2. Mechanisms linking social media information environments to civic trust

Mechanism	Evidence-derived description	Immediate information effect	Likely civic-trust implication
Engagement-maximizing ranking	Emotionally salient and identity-congruent content receives repeated visibility.	Higher recall, faster sharing, lower reflection	Can weaken shared reality and accelerate distrust when false claims target institutions or elections.
Homophily and echo chambers	Users interact primarily with similar others inside dense network clusters.	Selective exposure and repeated social validation	Makes misinformation harder to correct and supports polarized forms of distrust.
Intentional peer-network news seeking	Users actively obtain news through friends and family in personal networks.	More reflective engagement and greater attention to socially meaningful information	Can modestly strengthen political trust when exposure is intentional rather than passive.
Verified news following on social media	Professional news accounts are made part of everyday platform use.	Higher knowledge, greater awareness of true stories, better belief accuracy	Can strengthen trust in news and support democratic resilience.
Youth digital organizing and belonging	Platforms are used for civic identity formation, mutual aid, and issue-based participation.	Higher agency and community connection	Can sustain civic commitment even when trust in mainstream institutions declines.
Context-rich corrective interventions	Corrections explain why a claim is misleading rather than merely labeling it.	Greater trust in the correction and better discernment	Improves the chances that users accept corrective information instead of dismissing it.

4. Discussion

The reviewed literature supports a dual-path understanding of social media's democratic effects on younger users. One pathway is corrosive. Engagement-based ranking, homophilous networks, emotional salience, and repetitive false claims create conditions in which misinformation can spread efficiently and become identity-congruent. Under these conditions, users are more likely to form inaccurate beliefs about institutions, elections, and public issues. As trust in news weakens, corrective information becomes easier to dismiss, and distrust can escalate into a self-reinforcing cycle. This is the pathway most often highlighted in public debate (Beauvais, 2022; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

The second pathway is resilience-building. When youth and young adults intentionally seek news through meaningful networks, follow verified news accounts, encounter explanations rather than bare warning labels, and possess the digital competence to verify claims, social media can improve knowledge and belief accuracy. In this pathway, social platforms become spaces where democratic learning occurs within everyday routines. Rather than undermining civic trust, they can support more informed and more reflective forms of participation (Altay et al., 2025; Dayrit et al., 2022; Drolsbach et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Importantly, these pathways are not determined by the platform name alone. Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, or X are not inherently democratic or anti-democratic. Their effects depend on how ranking systems, content formats, network ties, and institutional actors interact. This point should shift the focus of

analysis from 'screen time' and platform moralism toward the quality of the information environments embedded within platforms (Altay et al., 2025; Lasser & Poechhacker, 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

A second major conclusion concerns the nature of civic trust itself. The literature suggests that trust should be understood as both moderator and outcome. It is a moderator because people who already trust credible news sources are better positioned to reject misinformation. It is an outcome because exposure to false claims, especially those targeting institutions and elections, can erode trust over time. This recursive quality explains why trust is so difficult to rebuild once misinformation becomes embedded in a political identity. It also explains why interventions centered only on correcting isolated claims are insufficient if they do not address the broader environment of distrust (Altay et al., 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

At the same time, the literature warns against treating all distrust as pathological. Several youth studies, especially those involving marginalized communities, show that lower trust in institutions can coexist with higher civic agency, stronger community commitment, and more sophisticated political analysis. For these young people, distrust may reflect lived experience rather than manipulation. A democratic response should therefore not aim to maximize trust in the abstract. It should aim to make institutions, media systems, and platforms more trustworthy while preserving young people's capacity for critical judgment. In this sense, democratic resilience depends on the combination of verification, accountability, and justified confidence rather than on passive deference (Callahan et al., 2024; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024).

The evidence also makes clear why youth and young adults deserve focused attention. This life stage involves emerging political identity, heightened peer orientation, increasing exposure to public issues, and a still-developing repertoire of verification habits. Social media platforms become civic classrooms, social arenas, and emotional environments at the same time. This convergence magnifies both opportunity and risk. A feed can introduce a young person to new civic vocabularies, help them find belonging, and support action; the same feed can normalize misinformation, expose them to trauma, and deepen institutional alienation. Policies designed for generic users are therefore unlikely to be enough (Callahan et al., 2024; Wilf et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

An equally important implication concerns measurement and evaluation. In low-trust environments, success cannot be defined only by reduced sharing of false content. A platform may suppress virality while still deepening cynicism if correction is experienced as opaque or politically biased. Likewise, a news intervention may increase factual knowledge without improving institutional confidence if users continue to experience institutions as distant or unresponsive. Future interventions should therefore be evaluated across multiple outcomes at once, including belief accuracy, trust in news, trust in institutions, perceived legitimacy of correction, and willingness to engage civically. A trust-sensitive design framework is more demanding than a false-content removal framework, but it is better aligned with the democratic problem identified in the reviewed literature (Altay et al., 2025; Drolsbach et al., 2024; Lasser & Poechhacker, 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024).

A particularly important next step is to connect platform-level exposure data with youth-centered developmental analysis. Behavioral trace data can show what became visible and repeated, but interviews and panel surveys are needed to explain how younger users interpreted that content, whether they trusted it, and how it shaped belonging or disengagement. Mixed-method designs would be especially valuable for distinguishing distrust rooted in misinformation from distrust rooted in lived experiences of exclusion or institutional failure. Without that distinction, interventions risk treating all scepticism as error and missing the democratic significance of critical but justified distrust (Callahan et al., 2024; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Wilf et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

The present review also has limits. It is a focused interdisciplinary synthesis rather than an exhaustive systematic review, and the included studies vary considerably in national context, platform, age range, and measurement strategy. Some provide direct evidence on youth and young adults, whereas others illuminate broader mechanisms through which misinformation and trust interact. In addition, several studies capture periods of unusual intensity, such as elections, protest cycles, or pandemic disruption. The patterns identified here are therefore best understood as a robust interpretive map rather than a single causal estimate. Even so, the convergence across panel, experimental, qualitative, and conceptual work strengthens confidence in the central claim that information environments matter more than platform labels alone.

Several practical implications follow. For platforms, the priority should be to move beyond single-metric engagement optimization. Ranking systems should account for informational quality, trustworthiness, diversity, and toxicity in addition to click-through or watch time. Context-rich corrections should be preferred to bare warning labels, and platform transparency should make it easier to understand why certain content becomes visible. For

news organizations, the literature suggests that professionally produced reporting can still matter on social media when it is made accessible within the spaces where younger users already spend time. Distribution strategy should therefore be treated as part of civic infrastructure, not just audience growth. For educators, media literacy must be linked to civic education. Younger users need not only to detect falsehoods, but to understand how feeds work, how trust is formed, how communities validate information, and why verification is a public responsibility. For public institutions, credibility cannot be assumed. Transparent, timely, and community-sensitive communication is necessary if corrective information is to be persuasive in low-trust environments (Altay et al., 2025; Beauvais, 2022; Drolsbach et al., 2024; Lasser & Poehhacker, 2025).

The literature also points to several unresolved research problems. First, there are still too few direct studies that examine algorithmic curation, misinformation, and civic trust together in youth-specific samples. Much of the existing evidence connects only two parts of the chain at once. Second, more cross-platform work is needed. The reviewed studies cover Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and broader social-media environments, but less is known about how short-form video platforms and recommendation-heavy systems shape civic trust among younger users. Third, future research should differentiate more clearly among trust in news, trust in institutions, trust in elections, and trust in community-based sources. Lumping these forms of trust together can obscure important patterns. Fourth, the field would benefit from more longitudinal, behavioral-tracking, and mixed-method designs that capture how changing media routines shape trust over time. Fifth, more research is needed beyond moments of crisis, elections, or pandemic disruption, and beyond a small set of national contexts (Altay et al., 2025; Malorni & Wilf, 2025; Mont'Alverne et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023).

Despite these gaps, the reviewed evidence is already sufficient to challenge two common simplifications. The first is that social media necessarily destroy civic trust. The second is that more exposure to opposing content will automatically solve the problem. The literature instead suggests that democratic resilience depends on healthier information environments, context-sensitive interventions, and greater attention to how younger users actually learn, belong, and act online (Altay et al., 2025; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Drolsbach et al., 2024).

Table 3. Design and intervention options derived from the reviewed literature

Intervention or design lever	Main mechanism	Expected benefit	Main limitation or caution
Contextual community notes	Provides explanation and evidence, not only a false/misleading label	Higher trust in fact-checking and better discernment	Effectiveness still depends on users accepting the legitimacy of the corrective system.
Verified news exposure within platforms	Places professional reporting inside existing user routines	Improves knowledge, belief accuracy, and trust in news	Requires accessible platform-native distribution and user willingness to follow credible sources.
Youth-centered media literacy	Builds verification habits and feed awareness	Reduces vulnerability to misinformation and supports critical participation	Literacy alone cannot fully offset toxic or manipulative platform environments.
Bridging-based ranking	Promotes content that resonates across diverse audiences	Potentially increases consensus and weakens silo effects	May be difficult to calibrate without suppressing controversy or minority voices.
Intelligence-based ranking	Promotes content likely to improve collective accuracy	Potentially supports belief accuracy and healthier discourse	Requires normative choices about what counts as useful or trustworthy information.
Chronological feed reversion	Reduces personalization and ranking opacity	May simplify exposure pathways	Does not reliably reduce polarization and can still expose users to low-quality or extreme content.
Institutional transparency and rapid communication	Improves credibility of public messaging during contentious periods	Can reduce the space in which rumors flourish	Less effective when institutions are already widely distrusted or communicate inconsistently.
Wellbeing support for youth organizers	Addresses burnout, harassment, and vicarious trauma	Helps sustain long-term civic participation	Often neglected in platform and policy discussions focused only on content accuracy.

5. Conclusions

This review set out to examine how algorithmic feeds, misinformation, and civic trust intersect in the lives of youth and young adults. The evidence suggests that there is no single social-media effect. Social platforms can amplify misinformation, reinforce homophilous clusters, and weaken confidence in news and institutions when feeds prioritize engagement over informational quality. Yet the same platforms can also improve knowledge, increase belief accuracy, support belonging, and strengthen trust when users encounter verified news, contextual correction, and constructive civic communities.

Three conclusions are especially important. First, the democratic consequences of social media depend on information environments rather than platform use in general. What users see, how often they see it, who shares it, and how credible it appears are more important than the fact of platform membership alone. Second, civic trust is dynamic. It is shaped by both misinformation and the credibility of corrective systems, and it varies across domains such as news, institutions, and elections. Third, youth and young adults experience social media as a civic infrastructure. Their online lives blend information seeking, identity formation, emotional exposure, and collective action, which means that misinformation and trust must be studied together rather than in isolation.

The broader implication is that democratic resilience cannot be built through fact-checking alone. It requires healthier ranking systems, stronger news visibility, better civic communication, and youth-centered media literacy that supports critical but constructive participation. Future research should move toward more direct tests of algorithmic curation, more differentiated models of trust, and more longitudinal work with younger populations across diverse social contexts. The future of civic trust will depend not only on what is false, but on how digital environments are designed to make the reliable, contextual, and democratically useful more visible.

Acknowledgments: No external funding was received for this review. No acknowledgments to report.

Ethics Statement: This manuscript is a literature-based review and did not involve human or animal participants. Ethics approval was therefore not required.

Conflicts of Interest: No conflicts of interest to declare.

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