Curated Verification: Partisan Differences in Audiences' Information Validation Strategies

Abstract

Two studies reported here show, in contrast to what other recent studies have suggested, that there are two patterns of sources that audiences use to fact-check news. Interpersonal verification indexes audience preference for checking with members of their in-groups. Mass-mediated verification indexes audience preference for checking with fact-checking sites and other alternate trusted news media. Two evolutionary psychology theories guide the research and explain the results. The first theory accounts for how humans evolved to prefer veridical/factual information, and the second accounts for how the developing demands of complex social environments led humans to rely on influential others to determine truth. Modern developments of these two theories explicate why humans use interpersonal and mass-mediated sources, and the variables that predict relative preferences for the two, including partisan predispositions.

Keywords: News verification, partisan differences, curated flows, legacy media, social media, Traditional Moral Values Triad, Evaluative Space Model

Recent studies of audience intent to verify news (Edgerly et al., 2019; Mourão et al., 2023; Robertson et al., 2020) identify a useful index that includes how frequently people use various types of verification sources; for example, friends and family; a search engine such as Google; other news outlets they trust; people in their social media feeds (e.g., Facebook, X, Reddit); and fact-checking sites such as PolitiFact, Fact-Check.org, or Snopes. These studies show that total source checking varies as a function of such variables as how important people think the story is, how much they trust the source that carries the story, their familiarity with the story topic, and their liberal/conservative ideologies.

Here, however, guided by two of evolutionary psychology's most compelling theories of how people identify truth or facts, we posit that embedded in the sources that one might check, are two distinct types: interpersonal and mass-mediated. With the vast expansion of digital choices beyond legacy media, it is possible to curate one's media diet based on their personal predispositions (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Although prior studies focus on how content curation relates to selective information exposure (e.g., Merten, 2021; Cardenal et al., 2019), little is known about how this curation is associated with audiences' verification behaviors.

Our factor analysis reveals that verification intentions are a two-dimensional construct of interpersonal and mass-mediated. This holds true across both a U.S. representative sample and a Michigan state sample. Our findings also suggest that partisanship affects preference between these dimensions. While there is a general preference for mass-mediated over interpersonal verification, Republicans exhibit a higher inclination towards interpersonal verification, leading to a lower preference for mass-mediated verification compared to Democrats.

Two theories of human evolution of the determination of "truth" or "reality" are important here. First, we look at Cacioppo's theory of the Evaluative Space Model. It was

developed to explain the drive for discernment of "reality" and how the positive or negative valence of that reality impacted "verification." The second theory is about the changes in verification that occurred when humans went from small family/kinship units to much larger and more diverse social units (i.e., villages, cities). In this evolutionary transition, the question of "reality" was changed from more simple times when one's own perception of an environment was central, to a time when what others thought took on at an important secondary value for survival. In the next sections we overview what is known about typical news verification activities of news consumers. We then explore what evolutionary psychology theory tells us about human attempts to determine reality and truth, and how relevant it is to today.

Audiences' News Verification Behavior

Commentators on the problem of widespread mis- and disinformation argue that it is important that audiences check information they encounter (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Trust in news is now partially complemented by audiences themselves sharing the verification role that used to be exclusively controlled by journalists (Hellmueller et al., 2013; Karlsson, 2011; Ng & Neyazi, 2023; Singer et al., 2011; Tandoc et al., 2018).

Tandoc et al. (2018) report that when people are asked when they verify information, they say they turn to external sources when they are unsure of its authenticity. Unlike what people said, however, Edgerly et al. (2020) report that people tend to fact-check when they want to confirm information they believe to be true. That said, Mourão et al. (2023) find no evidence that these two motivations — accuracy assessment or belief confirmation — make a difference in the intent to verify. However, this may have been a function of *not* disaggregating the many choices people have for verification in a complex media ecosystem. Simply asking people's

willingness to verify might not capture the complexity involved in the process of information-seeking when individuals are given multiple options to engage in the behavior.

In our high-choice media environment (Hermida, 2015), the affordances of digital platforms enable audiences to triangulate various types of verification sources. During a single internet browsing session, audiences can surf from search engines to news websites, social media platforms, online forums, and fact-checking services in line with their needs and preferences (Flanagin, 2017). Audiences can selectively build specific information-seeking strategies when they are motivated to validate information.

Determining Truth in Terms of Evolutionary Psychological Processes

Evaluative Space Model of Evolution

Early in the evolution of humans, it was critical that they could distinguish between approach and avoidance stimuli. Stimuli that indicated threats of predation required avoidance to survive, while indications of benefits required approach to gain those benefits. While much theorizing about these two effects has assumed they are opposite ends of a single continuum (that is, the more negative affect is, the less positive), newer theories based on neurological findings suggest that emotions operate in a bivariate space where positive affect and negative affect are independent dimensions. Dominant in this literature is the Evaluative Space Model (ESM; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cacioppo et al., 1997). Their model is depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 here]

In the figure, the x-axis is an index of the distance of the threat from self — from large to small. With greater proximity to a threat, the more negative/aversive emotion is experienced. The further from the threat, the more positive/appetitive emotions are experienced. The y-axis is the degree of emotional arousal or motivational activation. At each point in the graph, negative and

positive emotions are present (coactivation of aversive and appetitive), and the relative intensities of the two are critically important (Norris et al., 2010). The graph represents the classic problem for humans, that is they must constantly decide whether to approach or avoid a stimulus before knowing whether the outcome will be hostile (they likely won't survive) or hospitable (they will thrive; Norris et al., 2010). At its simplest, to the left of where the two lines cross (appetitive is higher than aversive), approach is likeliest. To the right (aversive is higher than appetitive) avoidance is likeliest. Clearly for this model to work, perceiving the real world as it is will be critical. Thus, at the earliest of human evolution, discerning "true facts" was crucial to survival. And manifold research indicates that discernment of "facts" (a saber tooth lion is approaching) is the primary task to survive.

However, this model operates most clearly when individuals are in small groups with mainly kinships relations. As the size and diversity of groups of humans increased, the problem of how to evaluate information coming from social relationships developed. The additional requirements to evaluate information in terms of what important others believe has been developed by a modern theory of information processing called the Traditional Moral Values Theory.

Traditional Moral Values Theory

There is significant support for the idea that partisanship attributes like liberalism and conservatism result from evolution of personality attributes. The fundamental finding (e.g., Bouchard, 2009) is that three personality attributes: authoritarianism, religiosity, and conservatism are so highly correlated in research over the last 60 years, that they are factors in an evolved human variable that Bouchard labels "traditionalism." Koenig and Bouchard (2006) label the three attributes as the Traditional Moral Values Triad. As human societies evolved from

familial and kinship structures to larger, more diverse communities, the conservative answer favored adhering to one's own in-group authority, while the liberal stance advocated following expert guidance.

The correlations among the three Triad variables remain supported today. Further strong differentiation of liberal and conservative influences is also supported with the consistent finding that the influence of political ideology and moral beliefs on judgment of facts (e.g., Blank & Shaw, 2015; Liu & Ditto, 2013). Conservatives' belief in scientific "facts" is weaker than liberal beliefs (e.g., Gropp, 2019). Although both liberals and conservatives are convinced by external verification of facts such as science or other expert authorities provide, the reliance on the authority of one's in-group members remains predictively greater for conservatives than liberals (Jost & Krochik, 2014). This suggests two patterns of choice of sources with which to verify news. First, most people will choose external factual sources like other reputable news sources and fact-checking sites. Second, however, although people will all occasionally choose in-group sources, this propensity will be significantly higher for conservatives than liberals. The idea that liberals and conservatives differ in the Traditional Moral Values Triad (TMVT) dimensions thus provides compelling theory about why there will be source choice differences in news verification of Democrats and Republicans.

Linking Evolutionary Psychological Theories and News Verification

We now link the evolution perspective with how news verification strategies may be differentiated. Just as information curation differentiates between types of content, audiences may mobilize in-group members (i.e., asking friends or family, checking social media or messaging apps) or resort to external expert sources (analogous to choosing scientific or fact-

based sources; i.e., checking news outlets or fact-checking sites, searching trusted news sources) to verify information (see Tandoc et al., 2018; Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Wenzel, 2019).

Mass-Mediated versus Interpersonal Verification Intentions

These differential patterns of audiences' verification acts observed (Walter et al., 2020) align with two broad information-seeking intentions: interpersonal versus mass-mediated. To be specific, interpersonal verification intention can be translated as the willingness to utilize personal social networks as a domain for information verification. Whereas mass-mediated verification intention refers to the extent to which individuals are willing to leverage journalistic outlets to assess information quality.

Yet, the two intentions direct a preference for a particular information curator, rather than being antecedents of using completely distinct verification sources. Indeed, audiences might encounter all kinds of mass-mediated contents on social media, but the interpersonal verification intention specifically operates on trust in the in-group members mediating them, rather than the media contents themselves (Turcotte et al., 2015). That is, interpersonal verification intention indicates the preference for *trusted social filters* of in-group networks (Canini et al., 2011; Liu & Lee, 2010). Mass-mediated verification intention, on the other hand, represents the need for direct consultation with *expert media outlets* outside of in-group networks.

Likewise, studies show that audiences tend to gather verification information from micro-level social networks, but ultimately turn to macro-level sources like legacy media, fact-checking services, or official government channels when it is imperative to establish authenticity (Wenzel, 2019; see also Toff & Nielsen, 2018). These findings suggest that audiences' intentions to conduct interpersonal vs. mass-mediated verification may be differentiated in the first place.

Thus, there is great complexity for humans as they attempt to determine if a news story or news headline is true or not. The TMVT, as noted above, suggests a simple evolution-based explanation for how humans see the difference between checking with in-group others and expert sources. This suggests that we will observe clear evidence for the two types, rather than a single index of "verifying."

H1: Audiences' verification intention has two dimensions: interpersonal and mass-mediated.

Having admitted its unconventionality, we test H1 in the methods section; because "[O]ne of the primary motivations for dimensionalizing a construct is to analyze relationship differences that might not emerge from a one-dimensional approach," and "the hypothesized dimensionality of a construct should be specified *a priori*" (Mowen & Voss, 2008, pp. 497-500). Thus, testing the relative fit of the two-factor model should furnish evidence of whether interpersonal vs. mass-mediated verification intentions are distinct within the higher-order construct (Werner & Schermelleh-Engel, 2010). Furthermore, the results would also allow us to test whether each sub-dimension operates as an independent operational concept (Edward, 2001).

Partisanship and Differential Verification Intentions

The size of the potential gap between the two dimensions of verification intention might vary by individual differences. Some people may base their verification mechanisms primarily on asking in-group members, while others could be more willing to incorporate using legacy media or fact-checking services into their verification sequences (see Waruwu et al., 2021). If there is supportive evidence for the two types of verification, we return to the TMVT to suggest two additional hypotheses:

H2: Mass-mediated verification intention is stronger than interpersonal verification intention.

This is predicted by the evidence that regardless of partisanship, both Democrats and Republicans exhibit a fundamental acceptance of facts as witnessed by, for example, observing the authority of science (e.g., Blank & Shaw, 2015; Gropp, 2019; Liu & Ditto, 2013). This perspective also receives strong support from the general theory of how evolution works (Cacioppo et al., 1997). The entire emotion coding system of humans is thought to have developed to connect *correct* stimulus identification with affect (negative vs. positive), which motivates approach and avoidance.

However, TMVT shows that as humans became members of more complex human environments from family and kinship to large and diverse societies, an additional fitness attribute becomes important — the authority and thus safety of in-group members. This leads to human attributes responsiveness to in-group authority, religiosity, and conservatism, all three highly correlated with each other. Therefore, a secondary feature of use of verification will be the differences in amount of reliance on in-group others vs fact-based veridicality. Thus:

H3: While both Democrats and Republicans will exhibit interpersonal verification intention, the relative level of interpersonal verification intention will be higher for Republicans than Democrats.

If the respective relationships between the two verification intentions and partisanship follow opposite patterns, as hypothesized above, the gap between interpersonal and mass-mediated intentions should increase or decrease along a continuum of partisanship (i.e., from strong Democrat to strong Republican). That is, the subtractive value of one minus the other indicates how the verification flows are curated differently, such that a higher value indicates a

higher preference for one verification method over another. For example, Democrats may strongly favor mass-mediated verification over interpersonal verification, while Republicans may do so to a lesser extent.

In any case, differences in preferences for verification methods suggest that people with different partisan identities may differ in their verification outcomes, which in turn may lead to different understandings of socio-political affairs (Stroud & Lee, 2013). To investigate this point rigorously, we explore the factors known to be associated with the audiences' verification modes. Thus, finally we ask beyond the partisan effects on news verification attempts:

RQ: What other factors predict audiences' preferences between interpersonal versus mass-mediated verification?

Research Design

The proposed hypotheses and research question were tested using two distinct samples. In Study 1, a U.S. representative sample was employed to analyze how audiences seek to verify the veracity of political headlines. In Study 2, built on the results from Study 1, adjustments were made to the verification intention scales, and a Michigan sample was utilized to examine how audiences approach the verification of *non*-political content on social media.

While partisan cues, such as media brands or ideological framing, can be endogenous to the perceived uncertainty of the news as audiences are asked to validate it (Bakker et al., 2020; Shin & Thorson, 2017), non-political social media posts are relatively free from such partisan endogeneity issues. For example, Republicans' trust in Fox News or distrust in CNN could impact their inclination to verify specific headlines. However, this spurious effect of credibility judgments in the relationship between partisanship and verification patterns can be ruled out when verifying non-political content on social media. Thus, if patterns of verification intentions

observed in Study 1 are replicated in Study 2, it could be suggested that they are less prone to specific communication contexts, such as political affairs.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure. The study was part of a larger online survey investigating audience motivations for news verification (references withheld for review). The survey was conducted via Qualtrics' paid participant pool in July of 2020, which recruited 616 participants using quotas that matched the U.S. Census (M_{age} = 45.53, SD_{age} = 17.36). The sample had about an even number of male (n = 296, 48.1%) and female participants (n = 320, 51.9%), and was mostly white (n = 473, 76.8% white; 12.7%, black/African American; 5.4%, Asian/Asian American; 5.1% Native American, Pacific Islander or other racial groups). Participants completed political affiliation and demographic questions and were then randomly assigned to read a news headline randomly assigned to CNN, Fox News, or no outlet. To control for the idiosyncrasies of each headline, there were eight headlines, with four headlines leaning Democrats and four leaning Republicans (e.g., Headline from CNN: "Poll: Most Americans say undocumented immigrants brought as children should be allowed to stay in the US"; Headline from Fox News: "ICE arrested more than 127,000 illegal immigrants with criminal convictions in 2017").

Independent Variable

Partisan Identification. Participants were asked how they identify their partisanship with a nine-point scale item ("Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Independent, or Republican?"; 1= Strong Democrat, 5 = Independent with no lean, 9 = Strong Republican; M = 4.63, SD = 2.84).

Dependent Variables

Verification Intention. After being presented with a news headline, respondents were asked about their willingness to perform each one of six types of verification behaviors: "Based on the headline you just read, how likely are you to check the accuracy of the information to find out if it's true or not… by (a) asking a friend or family member; (b) consulting a search engine such as Google; (c) checking what another news outlet had to say about this topic; (d) checking what a news outlet you trust had to say about this; (e) looking to see what people on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) have to say; and (f) visiting a fact-checking site such as PolitiFact, Fact- Check.org, or Snopes." All items were measured on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very likely; $M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.65$, $\alpha = .90$).

Despite the high reliability of the original six-item, principal axis factoring (PAF) revealed variations in factor loadings contingent upon the type of verification strategy. Notably, items (a) and (e), which suggest leveraging interpersonal sources, exhibited factor loadings more than one standard deviation below the average. Following DiStefano et al.'s (2009) advice that "average scores may be useful to foster comparisons across factors" (p. 2), we performed a Promax rotation, keeping the number of factors fixed as two (Carpenter, 2018). The resulting pattern matrix indicated that verification intentions constitute a two-dimensional construct. Specifically, items (a) and (e) were classified as representing interpersonal verification intentions (IVI), while items (b), (c), (d), and (f) were delineated as mass-mediated verification intentions (MVI) (see Online Supplementary Table S1; S2 for more details).

Next, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to compare the relative fits of the original one-factor model and the proposed two-factor model (Werner & Schermelleh-Engel, 2010). The CFA results showed that bidimensional model has improved

model fits than unidimensional model: $\chi^2_{diff} = 87.192$, $df_{diff} = 1$, $p < .001$ (see Song et al, 2019 for a methodological review). Supported by these statistical evidence, we operationalized IVI and MVI as separate variables: (1) IVI: $M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = .80$; (2) MVI ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.76$, $\alpha = .93$ (see Online Supplementary Table S3 and Figure S1 for more details).

Additionally, both dimensions demonstrated convergent validity by showing a significant correlation with the theoretically related variable of issue importance (Mourão et al., 2023; for IVI: $r = .391$, $p < .01$; for MVI: $r = .456$, $p < .01$). As such, we found compelling evidence that audiences' verification intention is a bidimensional construct. Thus, H1 was supported.

Control Variables

We controlled potential covariates known from prior studies in three blocks (Edgerly et al., 2020; Mourão et al., 2023). The demographic block included age, gender, race, education, and income. These personal traits are known to be related to media consumption.

Second, news-related variables included general news use, general news credibility, and issue importance given news usage patterns can influence the choice of sources for verification. General news use was gauged on a seven-point scale: "How often do you get news about politics and government?" (1 = Never, 7 = All the time; $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.74$). Participants completed three-item measures of news credibility on a seven-point scale (1= Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree), asking "The news in general is…: a) Trustworthy, b) Telling the whole story, and c) Biased (reverse coded)." Scales were computed by taking the average of the items, resulting in a credibility score ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .72$). Moreover, issue importance is known to be among the strongest predictors of verification intentions. We asked each participant "How important to you is the topic of this headline?" using a seven-point scale (1 = Not important at all, 7 = Very important; $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.99$).

Third, several political variables that could covary with the extent to which participants identify with their partisan identity were controlled in the analysis (see Shin & Thorson, 2017): Political interest, assessed with a single item (M = 4.75, SD = 1.86), and political efficacy, measured with six items (M = 4.60, SD = 1.13, α = .74), were both rated on a seven-point scale.

Results

Initially, we examined H2, positing that the intention to utilize a mass-mediated verification strategy would surpass the inclination towards interpersonal verification strategy, irrespective of partisanship. A paired-sample t-test revealed a significant disparity, with the mass-mediated verification intention scoring significantly higher than the interpersonal verification intention (M_{diff} = 0.71, SE = .058, t(615) = 12.18, p < .001, d = 0.49, 95% CI [0.407, 0.574]). As H2 was supported, we operationalized the mass-mediation preference (MVP) as the subtraction between the two ("MVI – IVI"; M = .71, SD = 1.44).

Next, we ran a series of OLS linear regressions to test whether the levels of IVI and MVI vary by partisanship (2nd and 3rd columns in Table 1). Interestingly, IVI and MVI showed opposite patterns in their relationships with partisanship — on a continuum from "strong Democrat" to "strong Republican." As Figure 2 shows in greater detail, partisanship had a statistically significant positive relationship with IVI (β = .053, SE = .025, p < .05). In other words, the more strongly respondents identified themselves as Republicans, the more willing they were to use interpersonal social networks to verify information (orange line). On the other hand, although it did not reach statistical significance, self-identification as a Republican was negatively related to MVI (β = -.028, SE = .023, p = .220; green line).

[Table 1 here]

These opposing patterns mutually formed a significant negative relationship between partisanship and MVP (β = -.081, SE = .022, $p < .001$). In terms of ratio between the two verification modes, Republicans' verification is likely to be less mass-mediated and more interpersonal than Democrats' (blue line). Thus, H3 was supported.

[Figure 2 here]

Moreover, it is noteworthy that MVP had a statistically significant positive relationship with age and general news use, and a marginally significant positive relationship with political efficacy. These three variables answer our RQ of what other factors besides political dispositions are associated with the preference between interpersonal versus mass-mediated verification.

Discussion

These analyses provide strong evidence that audiences' verification intentions are a two-dimensional construct. The findings demonstrate existence of a distinction between interpersonal vs. mass-mediated modes of verification that has been widely observed but not rigorously categorized in extant research (Edgerly et al., 2020; Mourão et al.,2023; Walter et al., 2020). Most important, partisanship was significantly associated with curation of these different modes of verification: Republicans were more willing than Democrats to use in-group members as a social filter for verification sources. Although audiences overall preferred mass-mediated verification to interpersonal verification, the level of preference was negatively associated with self-identification as a Republican. These partisan differences in preferred verification methods suggest that the two groups can make different truth judgments about a given news.

Despite the new research outlooks offered here, limitations arise from its exploratory nature. First, the news headlines used in the parent survey were not exclusively designed for this study, so respondents were presented with eight different headlines rather than just an identical

treatment. That is, although we controlled for issue importance and political covariates, the endogeneity of partisanship may still affect respondents' initial judgments regarding the uncertainty of each headline. Second, the respective batteries of interpersonal and mass-mediated verification intentions were not numerically equivalent (two for interpersonal vs. four for mass-mediated). A comparison of the two types would be more valid if the number of items measuring the sub-dimensions were equal (Mowen & Voss, 2008). To address these issues, we conducted a new survey designed to probe if the findings of the present study are replicated in different communication contexts.[1]

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure. We tested our models with a Michigan-only sample. While the state-level data limit our ability to make generalizability claims, if the patterns found in the national representative sample of Study 1 were replicated in the current state-level sample, our findings would make a confirmatory case for their robustness.

To that end, Dynata, a professional research panel, was used to survey adult Michigan residents in October 2023 for its ability to reach participants in both rural and urban areas in Michigan. A total of 1,009 participants completed the survey, of which 892 responded appropriately to the attention check item included in the final dataset (pass rate: 88.4%; Rural: 313, Urban: 579). Most notably, samples were collected from 80 of the 83 Michigan counties, highlighting the unique inclusiveness of the survey scope. While age and gender quotas based on

[1] In the complete survey, respondents were not only asked what verification behaviors they would engage in to assess the *accuracy* of a presented headline (i.e., accuracy instruction), but also, they were asked to report how they would look for additional information to *confirm* their initial judgment about the headline. This confirmation instruction was accompanied with the same six items under the accuracy instruction. The results of the factor analysis and hypothesis testing with the measures under the confirmation instruction were consistent with those under the accuracy instruction (see Online Supplementary Table S6; S7; S8; Figure S3).

census were stratified for the urban sample, the rural sample could not warrant this stratification. The urban sample averaged 50.13 years of age and included more females (57.2%); the racial composition was 78.0 percent white and 15.1 percent black. In the rural sample, the average age was 54.70 and the racial composition was 91.1 percent white, reflecting the actual skewness of the rural population. However, the rural sample exhibited a notable imbalance in gender representation, with females accounting for 77.3% and males for 21.2%.

Independent Variable

Partisan Identification. Participants were asked how they identify their partisanship with a seven-point scale item ("In terms of politics, how do you identify yourself?"; 1= Strong Democrat, 7 = Strong Republican; $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.79$).

Dependent Variables

Verification Intention. Participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario. A vignette prompted them to report what they would do if they came across community related content posted by a neighbor in their community: "You will be asked about what steps you are likely to take if you stumble across the following post on the Internet by someone in your local community: *'I heard that the average gas price in this town is 5% higher than the Michigan average!! Is that true?'*" The gas price issue was selected based on the high issue saliency of local-level inflation as reported in a recent study (American Communities Project, 2023).

Then, participants were asked about their intent to perform each one of six behaviors. "Assuming you just happened to find the post, how likely are you to verify the information by…? (a) Asking a friend or family member; (b) consulting a search engine such as Google, Bing; (c) Using messaging apps to see what others say about the issue (e.g., Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram); (d) Checking what news outlets say about the

issue; (e) Looking to see what people on social media say (e.g., Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, Nextdoor); (f) visiting a fact-checking site such as PolitiFact, FactCheck.org, or Snopes." All items were measured on a seven-point scale (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely; $M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.33$, $\alpha = .79$).

Unlike in Study 1, an equal number of items were allocated to interpersonal verification (items a, c, e) and mass-mediated verification (items b, d, f), with three items each. Both PAF analysis and Promax rotation revealed a two-dimensional structure of the construct, replicating the findings of Study. Additionally, the CFA results also demostrated that bidimensional model has an improved model fit than unidimensional model: $\chi^2_{diff} = 173.437$, $df_{diff} = 1$, $p < .001$. As H1 confirmed again, we separately operationalized interpersonal and mass-mediated verification intentions: (1) IVI ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .75$); (2) MVI ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.51$, $\alpha = .71$) (see Online Supplementary Table S4; S5; Figure S2 for more details).

Control Variables

We controlled for potential covariates in the three blocks as in Study 1. The difference from Study 1 is that we included a broader set of news-related variables. Specifically, we controlled traditional media use, social media use, national news credibility and local news credibility. Traditional media use was measured by averaging the frequencies of using the following media. "In a typical week, how many days do you read or watch content from any of the following sources (including online)? (1) Local news media; (2) National network news, such as NBC, ABC, CBS; (3) Cable network news, such as CNN, Fox News, MSNBC; (4) Other national news organizations, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, AP, Bloomberg" (1 = 0 day, 7 = 6 days or more; $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.63$).

Likewise, social media use was measured with average frequencies of the following social media platforms. “How often do you use each of these social media platforms? (1) Facebook; (2) Twitter (now “X”); (3) Instagram; (4) TikTok; (5) Reddit; (6) Nextdoor” (1 = Never, 7 = All the time, $M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.20$).

Drawing upon Appelman and Sundar (2016), both national news credibility and local news credibility were estimated with the same three-item-measure. “Information from… (a) national news outlets (e.g., national/cable TV networks, national news organizations); (b) local news outlets (e.g., local newspapers, local TV networks, local radio channels) is… (1) Accurate; (2) Authentic; (3) Believable” (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; for national news credibility: $M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.34$, $\alpha = .96$; for local news credibility: $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.31$, $\alpha = .95$). We also asked participants about issue importance: “How important to you is the issue of gas prices?” (1 = Very unimportant, 7 = Very important; $M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.65$).

Lastly, we controlled political covariates. First, political interest was measured with three items. “Please indicate your interest in the following… (1) Politics; (2) Campaigns and social issues; (3) News” (1 = Not at all interested, 7 = Extremely interested; $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.66$, $\alpha = .88$). Second, following McLeod et al. (1999), political efficacy at state-level was estimated with two items. “(1) Every vote counts in a local election, including yours and mine; (2) In Michigan, everyone who wants to can have a voice in what the government does” (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; $M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .71$).

Results

First, we conducted a paired samples t-test for examining H2. The level of MVI was higher than that of IVI in the state-level dataset as well ($M_{diff} = 0.70$, $SE = .05$, $t(876) = 13.38$, p

< .001, d = 0.45, 95% CI [0.382, 0.521]). Thus, H2 was supported again. Accordingly, we computed MVP by subtracting IVI from MVI (M = .70, SD = 1.55).

Next, as in Study 1, we probed detailed patterns of how partisanship is associated with differential verification intention by parsing IVI and MVI as separated dependent variables (2nd and 3rd columns in Table 2). After controlling for the known covariates, partisanship was positively related to IVI (β = .057, SE = .029, p < .05). That is, Republicans were more willing than Democrats to utilize interpersonal social networks to verify online information. On the other hand, partisanship was negatively related to MVI, but this relationship was not statistically significant (β = -.043, SE = .031, p = .163).

Taken together, partisanship was negatively associated with MVP, supporting H3 (β = -.100, SE = .032, p < .01). In other words, Republicans have a weaker preference for mass-mediated verification than Democrats. As Figure 3 shows in greater detail, the opposite pattern of significantly higher interpersonal verification intention (orange line) and lower (but not significant) mass-mediated verification intention (green line) among those who identify strongly as Republicans converged into a lower mass-mediated preferences over interpersonal verification among Republicans than Democrats (blue line).

[Table 2; Figure 3 here]

Last, in response to our RQ, we found that MVP has a significant positive relationship with education level and political interest, and a marginally significant positive relationship with local news credibility, while a significant negative relationship with social media use.

Discussion

Study 2 closely replicated Study 1. The near-identicality of the regression plots from the two separate studies characterizes the robustness of the current findings. Furthermore, the extent

to which model fit improved when the measurement instrument was restructured from one to two dimensions was more substantial than was the case in Study 1. Given that we balanced the number of items across the two verification intentions, this improvement provides greater support for the bidimensionality of the verification intention construct. Likewise, the regression models in Study 2, which controlled for a wider range of news-related variables than in Study 1, explained a greater proportion of variation in the mass-mediated verification preference.

General Discussion

The combined analysis of Studies 1 and 2 provides compelling evidence that the construct of audiences' verification intentions has two dimensions, interpersonal and mass-mediated, and that audiences prefer the mass-mediated over the interpersonal. Further, this preference is stronger among Democrats than Republicans.

The mechanism of curated verification finds support in compelling theories within evolutionary psychology, particularly Cacioppo's Evaluative Space Model (ESM) and Koenig and Bouchard's Traditional Moral Values Triad (TMVT). According to ESM, individuals possess a default inclination to verify the factuality of external stimuli for their own survival. Additionally, TMVT suggests that the extent to which individuals rely on in-group opinion for factuality judgments is contingent upon personal dispositions, including political ideology.

The long-standing empirical evidence has consistently supported these classic theories, suggesting that individuals may employ two primary strategies for verifying the truthfulness of given information. The first strategy emphasizes the primacy of factuality, with mass-mediated journalistic sources serving as the main criterion for evaluating information veracity, although interpersonal sources are occasionally utilized. Yet, the extent to which individuals employ these distinct strategies can fluctuate depending on their political ideology. Specifically, for factuality

judgment, conservative Republicans are more inclined to lean towards in-group social filters, whereas liberal Democrats tend to prefer external fact checkings.

As noted above, our statistical analyses, conducted across a U.S. representative and a Michigan sample, provide empirical support for the hypotheses embedded in these theories. The findings underscore partisan disparities in verification strategies, which may yield disparate social understandings among ideological groups (Spohr, 2017), thereby exacerbating intergroup political tensions (Stroud & Lee, 2013). As such, our findings suggests another nuanced mechanism of partisan polarization.

One important limitation of this study is its limited generalizability. While we were able to confirm findings across different samples and communication contexts, our research design does not allow us to determine whether similar patterns would emerge in other scenarios, such as a national-level sample with non-political issues or a state-level sample with political issues. We encourage future research to replicate our study across diverse topics and communication contexts. Exploring whether differing verification strategies lead to disparities in understanding current issues among partisan groups would be a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

Lastly, we observed that the preference of mass-mediated verification tends to rise with increased consumption of legacy news (in study 1) and decline with greater usage of social media (in study 2). This pattern underscores the importance of fostering a media consumption habit that prioritizes direct engagement with journalistic sources, which is crucial for ensuring factuality-oriented verification practices.

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Table 1. *OLS regression models testing partisanship on verification intentions for Study 1.*

	Interpersonal Verification (IVI) (n = 615)	Mass-mediated Verification (MVI) (n = 615)	Mass-mediation Preference (MVP) (n = 615)
Block1. Demographics	*β* (*SE*)	*β* (*SE*)	*β* (*SE*)
Age	-.027*** (.004)	-.013*** (.004)	.014*** (.004)
Gender (m)	.175 (.133)	.049 (.124)	-.126 (.118)
Race (white)	-.089 (.160)	.019 (.149)	.108 (.141)
Education Level	-.007 (.068)	-.052 (.063)	-.046 (.060)
Income	-.038$^{\#}$ (.022)	-.022 (.021)	.016 (.020)
Block 2. News Variables			
General News Use	.003 (.052)	.110* (.048)	.107* (.046)
General News Credibility	.200*** (.053)	.168*** (.050)	-.032 (.047)
Issue Importance	.267*** (.036)	.270*** (.033)	.002 (.032)
Block 3. Political Variables			
Political Interest	.127** (.051)	.138**(.047)	.012 (.045)
Political Efficacy	.041 (.079)	.162* (.073)	.121$^{\#}$ (.069)
Partisan Identification (Republican)	.053* (.025)	-.028 (.023)	-.081*** (.022)
Total adjusted R^2	.253	.306	.081

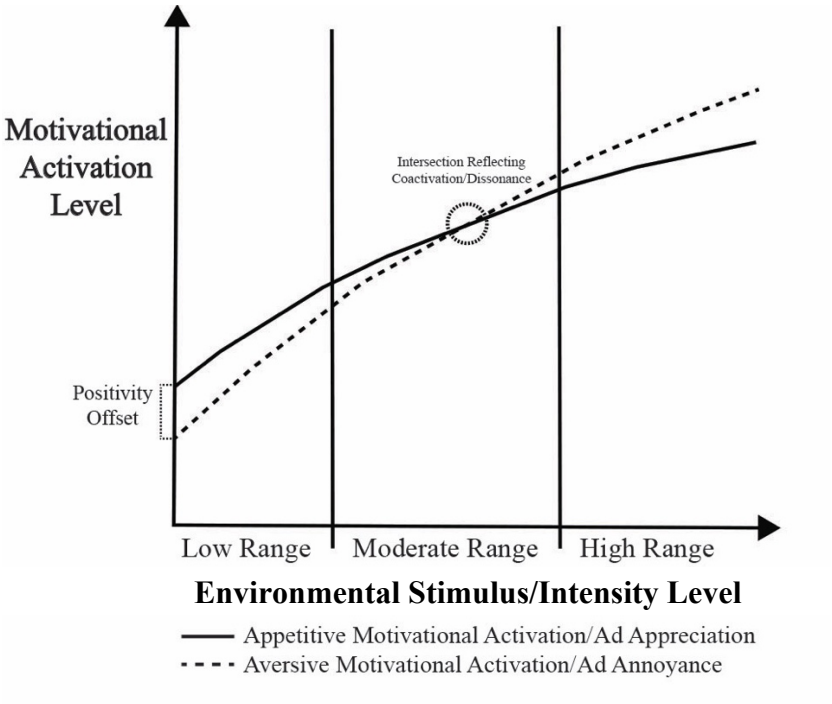
Note. Cell entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) standardized beta coefficients; Listwise deletion was applied for missing data. $^{\#}p < .10$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

Table 2. *OLS regression models testing partisanship on verification intentions for Study 2.*

	Interpersonal Verification (IVI) (n = 781)	Mass-mediated Verification (MVI) (n = 779)	Mass-mediation Preference (MVP) (n = 775)
Block1. Demographics	*β* (*SE*)	*β* (*SE*)	*β* (*SE*)
Age	-.018*** (.004)	-.015*** (.004)	.003 (.004)
Gender (m)	.021 (.105)	.124 (.113)	.088 (.116)
Race (white)	-.240$^{\#}$ (.134)	-.143 (.143)	.105 (.147)
Education Level	-.108** (.037)	.074$^{\#}$ (.039)	.180*** (.041)
Income	-.043** (.015)	-.018 (.016)	.024 (.016)
Block 2. News Variables			
Traditional Media Use	.006 (.037)	.055 (.040)	.051 (.041)
Social Media Use	.344*** (.048)	.214*** (.052)	-.220*** (.054)
National News Credibility	.063 (.048)	.027 (.052)	-.046 (.054)
Local News Credibility	.049 (.050)	.140** (.054)	.102$^{\#}$ (.056)
Issue Importance	.145*** (.029)	.138*** (.031)	-.009 (.032)
Block 3. Political Variables			
Political Interest	.044 (.037)	.180*** (.040)	.130** (.041)
Political Efficacy	.086* (.041)	.046 (.043)	-.041 (.045)
Partisan Identification (Republican)	.057* (.029)	-.043 (.031)	-.100** (.032)
Total adjusted R^2	.307	.216	.130

*Note***.** Cell entries are ordinary least squares (OLS) standardized beta coefficients; Listwise deletion was applied for missing data. $^{\#}p < .10$; $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$; $***p < .001$.

Figure 1. *Visualization of the Evaluative Space Model.*



Note. The graph is adapted from Cacioppo et al. (2011).

Figure 2. *The relationship between partisan identification and verification intention for Study 1.*

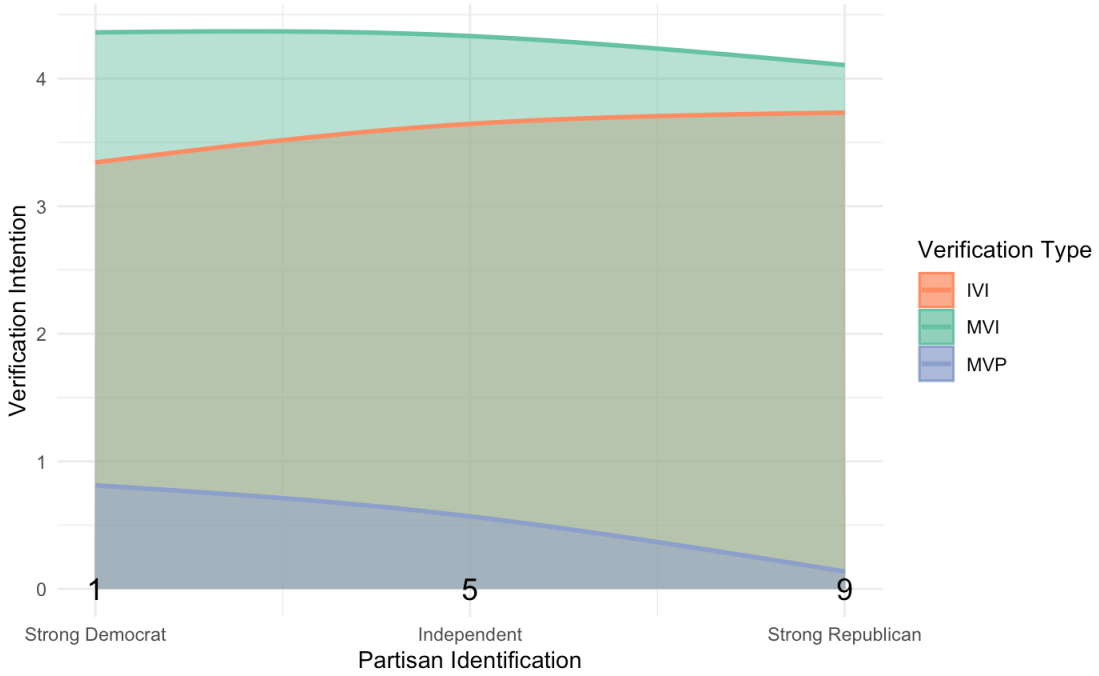


Figure 3. *The relationship between partisan identification and verification intention for Study 2.*