

Trust, Bias, and Dependency: Predicting Millennial News Consumption in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Rising scepticism toward mainstream news, combined with an apparent shift toward brand-level trust in specific media platforms, raises an important directionality question for Media System Dependency (MSD) research: does confidence in a particular news brand feed back into audiences' generalised trust in the media as an institution, or does institutional trust operate independently of brand-level experience? This study identified Brand Trust (BT) as the strongest predictor of media dependency among Malaysian millennials during the COVID-19 pandemic, this analysis explores whether Brand Trust, Perceived Media Bias (PMB), and the Degree of Individual Media Dependency (DIMD) function as antecedents of generalised Trust in Media (TM). Using the cross-sectional dataset of 421 Malaysian millennials from the Klang Valley, recruited through purposive and cluster sampling of Facebook and Instagram followers of three major Malaysian news outlets, the structural model was estimated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The structural results showed that Perceived Media Bias significantly predicted both Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.230, p < .001$) and Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.150, p = .019$), and that media dependency significantly predicted Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.117, p = .024$). However, Brand Trust did not significantly predict Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.073, p = .222$), and the indirect path from Perceived Media Bias to Trust in Media through Brand Trust was non-significant, indicating an absence of mediation. The reversed model's explanatory and predictive power was modest ($R^2 = .053-.059$; $f^2 \leq 0.056$; $Q^2_{\text{predict}} = .035-.043$), indicating that, although statistically detectable, these relationships are substantively small. These findings suggest that, within this cross-sectional sample, trust does not flow upward from brand-level experience to generalised institutional trust, reinforcing the directionality of the original model and cautioning researchers against assuming reciprocal trust transfer in crisis-era media consumption; longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to confirm the causal direction of this relationship.

Keywords: Brand Trust; Trust in Media; Media Dependency; Perceived Media Bias; PLS-SEM

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a paradox at the centre of contemporary media consumption: audiences increasingly doubted the credibility of mainstream news while simultaneously relying on digital platforms to make sense of a rapidly evolving health crisis (Caplanova et al., 2021; Dryhurst et al., 2020). Media System Dependency (MSD) theory explains this paradox by treating dependency as a function of the goals individuals pursue and the extent to which media resources are perceived as necessary to attain them (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Yet MSD theory says comparatively little about which layer of trust, institutional or brand-specific, drives that dependency, and in which direction the relationship runs.

A study examined this question among 421 Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley and found that Brand Trust, that is, confidence in specific news brands such as Malaysiakini, Berita Harian Online, or The Star, was a substantially stronger predictor of the Degree of Individual Media Dependency (DIMD) than generalised Trust in Media (TM) or Perceived Media Bias (PMB) ($\beta = 0.518$ versus $\beta = 0.097$ and a non-significant $\beta = 0.019$, respectively). That model treated Brand Trust as a mediator sitting between media scepticism and dependency, consistent with the proposition that audiences compartmentalise trust at the brand level even as they remain sceptical of the media industry as a whole.

That finding, however, leaves an important question unanswered: if Malaysian millennials trust specific brands more than the media in general, does that brand-level confidence subsequently generalise upward into greater institutional trust, or is brand trust a self-contained phenomenon that leaves broader scepticism untouched? Understanding this directionality matters both theoretically, for specifying MSD relationships correctly, and practically, for media organisations deciding whether investment in brand credibility can be expected to repair audiences' wider trust in journalism. This study addresses the gap by estimating a reversed structural model, in which Brand Trust, Perceived Media Bias, and media dependency are repositioned as antecedents of generalised Trust in Media, using the identical measurement instruments and dataset as the original dissertation research. The analysis follows current PLS-SEM reporting conventions (Hair et al., 2017, 2019; Memon et al., 2017) and evaluates both the explanatory and predictive adequacy of the reversed model.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Media System Dependency Theory and the Question of Directionality

MSD theory conceptualises the relationship between media, audiences, and the broader social system as interdependent, such that dependency intensifies when social instability increases the ambiguity individuals face and media resources are perceived as necessary to resolve it (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Y. Kim, 2020). Trust is central to this framework because audiences are unlikely to depend on sources they consider unreliable. Yet trust in MSD research has typically been modelled unidirectionally, as an antecedent of dependency rather than as an outcome that dependency, bias perception, or brand-level experience might, in turn, shape. Testing the reverse pathway offers a robustness check on the substantive model and clarifies whether the strong brand-level effect reported in the original study reflects a genuinely asymmetric relationship or a reciprocal one that would also be visible when the causal arrow is reversed (Hair et al., 2019).

Perceived Media Bias and Brand Trust

Perceived Media Bias (PMB) reflects an audience's judgement that news coverage is slanted, incomplete, or serves a particular agenda (Elejalde et al., 2018; Velasquez et al., 2021). Audiences who perceive bias in the broader news environment do not necessarily withdraw from media altogether; instead, they often become more discriminating, redirecting their confidence toward specific outlets they judge to be comparatively more balanced or transparent (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017; Chan et al., 2022). Because such discrimination requires evaluating one brand against another, elevated perceptions of industry-wide bias could plausibly heighten, rather than diminish, trust in the brand judged least biased. This reasoning motivates the first hypothesis:

H1: Perceived Media Bias (PMB) has a significant effect on Brand Trust (BT) among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley.

Perceived Media Bias and Trust in Media

Beyond its effect on any single brand, perceived bias also carries direct implications for how audiences judge the media as an institution. The hostile media effect describes how individuals who perceive coverage as biased against their own views tend to generalise that judgement to the wider media system, eroding institutional trust (Golan et al., 2021; Litovsky, 2021). At the same time, bias perception can sharpen critical media consumption, in which audiences actively compare sources, a process that can either reduce or, counter-intuitively, stabilise their overall trust depending on whether the comparison confirms or disconfirms their prior scepticism (Zhang, 2021). Given that PMB was theorised in the original model as a component of media scepticism operating alongside TM, it is reasonable to test whether it also predicts TM directly when the causal order is reversed:

H2: Perceived Media Bias (PMB) has a significant effect on Trust in Media (TM) among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley.

Media Dependency and Trust in Media

MSD theory implies a feedback loop between use and trust: repeated reliance on media for orientation, especially during crises, can itself cultivate confidence in those sources, because habitual engagement provides continuous opportunities to evaluate accuracy and usefulness (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; S. Kim, 2022). If the Degree of Individual Media Dependency built up during the pandemic functions in this self-reinforcing way, dependency should predict, rather than merely follow from, generalised Trust in Media. This possibility is tested directly in the reversed model:

H3: The Degree of Individual Media Dependency (DIMD) has a significant effect on Trust in Media (TM) among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley.

Brand Trust as an Antecedent of Trust in Media

The central question of this study is whether Brand Trust generalises upward into institutional trust. A generalisation account would hold that repeated positive experience with a specific, trusted brand gradually recalibrates an audience's overall judgement of the media, consistent with attitude-generalisation processes documented in brand and marketing research (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence, 2020). A compartmentalisation account, by contrast, holds that audiences can sustain confidence in a preferred brand precisely because they mentally separate it from the media system they otherwise distrust (Newman et al., 2019; Soomro et al., 2024); under this account, Brand Trust would not be expected to raise generalised Trust in Media.

H4: Brand Trust (BT) has a significant effect on Trust in Media (TM) among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley.

The Mediating Role of Brand Trust between Perceived Bias and Trust in Media

If Perceived Media Bias reallocates confidence toward specific brands (H1) and Brand Trust in turn shapes institutional trust (H4), then Brand Trust should carry at least part of the effect of PMB through to TM. Testing this indirect pathway clarifies whether brand-level trust functions as a conduit through which scepticism about the wider industry is either buffered or transmitted into judgements about the media as a whole (R. Han et al., 2022):

H5: Brand Trust (BT) mediates the relationship between Perceived Media Bias (PMB) and Trust in Media (TM) among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Population, and Sample

This study adapts cross-sectional, quantitative dataset and respondents were Malaysian millennials (born 1981-1996) residing in the Klang Valley who followed the Facebook or Instagram pages of one of three major Malaysian news outlets, Berita Harian Online, The Star, or Malaysiakini. Because no complete sampling frame of individual followers could be obtained, a two-stage cluster sampling design (news outlet, then platform) was combined with non-probability purposive recruitment through Meta Business Suite advertising, following screening for age, nationality, and platform-based news engagement. Data collection produced a final analytic sample of 421 valid responses, exceeding the minimum of 327 indicated by an a priori G*Power calculation for a two-tailed test at $\alpha = .05$ and power $(1-\beta) = .95$.

Measures

All constructs were measured on 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Trust in Media was adapted from Tsfaty and Cappella's (2003) trust-in-media scale; Perceived Media Bias, Brand Trust, and the Degree of Individual Media Dependency were adapted from established source-credibility and media-dependency instruments and refined through pre-testing for the Malaysian context, as reported in the

parent dissertation. After measurement model assessment, Brand Trust and Trust in Media were retained as reflective constructs with three items (E10, E2, E6) and two items (B1, B5) respectively, Perceived Media Bias with three items (C1, C5, C6), and the Degree of Individual Media Dependency with two items (D2, D6). Items were retained or dropped based on standardised loadings and their contribution to composite reliability and average variance extracted; the resulting reliability and convergent- and discriminant-validity statistics for all four constructs are reported in full in Section 4.1 (Tables 1-3).

Data Analysis Technique

Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). PLS-SEM was selected over covariance-based SEM because the study is oriented toward prediction and theory extension rather than confirmatory theory testing of an already well-established model, because the structural model combines several formatively adjacent latent constructs of unequal item counts, and because PLS-SEM's distributional flexibility suits survey data collected through non-probability sampling (Hair et al., 2017, 2019; Memon et al., 2017). Consistent with current guidelines, the measurement model was evaluated first for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, followed by assessment of the structural model for collinearity, path significance, effect sizes, coefficients of determination, and out-of-sample predictive relevance using the PLSpredict procedure (Shmueli et al., 2019). Significance of all indirect and direct paths was assessed using a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples and a two-tailed test, with paths considered significant at $t > 1.96$ and $p < .05$ (Hair et al., 2017).

RESULTS

Measurement Model Assessment

Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity were assessed via Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (ρ_a and ρ_c), and average variance extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 1, all Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (ρ_c) values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, and all AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating adequate internal consistency and convergent validity for all four constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2017).

Table 1. Construct reliability and convergent validity

Construct / Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Brand Trust		0.794	0.811	0.878	0.707
E10	0.829				
E2	0.810				
E6	0.882				
Degree of Individual Media Dependency		0.790	0.791	0.905	0.826
D2	0.914				

Construct / Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
D6	0.904				
Perceived Media Bias		0.696	0.711	0.829	0.619
C1	0.819				
C5	0.803				
C6	0.736				
Trust in Media		0.735	0.815	0.879	0.784
B1	0.839				
B5	0.930				

Note. rho_a and rho_c = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). As reported in Table 2, the square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal) exceeded its correlations with all other constructs, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All HTMT values (Table 3) remained below the conservative threshold of 0.85, well under the more permissive 0.90 cut-off, confirming that the four constructs are empirically distinct (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 2. Discriminant validity: Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Brand Trust	DIMD	Perceived Media Bias	Trust in Media
Brand Trust	0.841			
DIMD	0.485	0.909		
Perceived Media Bias	0.230	0.112	0.787	
Trust in Media	0.164	0.169	0.180	0.886

Note. Diagonal values (bold in original output) are the square root of AVE. DIMD = Degree of Individual Media Dependency.

Table 3. Discriminant validity: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	Brand Trust	DIMD	Perceived Media Bias
DIMD	0.608		
Perceived Media Bias	0.313	0.147	
Trust in Media	0.201	0.214	0.225

Indicator collinearity was assessed via the variance inflation factor (VIF); as shown in Table 4, all VIF values ranged from 1.322 to 1.819, well below the conservative threshold of 3.0 and the liberal threshold of 5.0, indicating no problematic collinearity among indicators (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 4. Indicator collinearity statistics (VIF)

Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF
B1	1.508	D2	1.740
B5	1.508	D6	1.740
C1	1.322	E10	1.622
C5	1.502	E2	1.647
C6	1.326	E6	1.819

Overall model fit was additionally assessed via the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). The SRMR for the saturated model was 0.082, within the conventional 0.08-0.10 range treated as acceptable for exploratory PLS path models, while the SRMR for the estimated model was higher at 0.142, exceeding the stricter 0.08 guideline sometimes applied to covariance-based SEM (Henseler et al., 2015). Because SRMR was developed for covariance-based SEM and its cut-offs remain debated for variance-based PLS-SEM, this elevated estimated-model value is reported for transparency but is not treated as disqualifying; it is consistent with, and reinforces, the modest explanatory power already indicated by the R^2 and f^2 results below.

Structural Model Assessment and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model explained a small proportion of variance in both endogenous constructs. Perceived Media Bias alone explained 5.3% of the variance in Brand Trust ($R^2 = .053$, $t = 2.604$, $p = .009$; adjusted $R^2 = .051$, $t = 2.487$, $p = .013$), and Brand Trust, the Degree of Individual Media Dependency, and Perceived Media Bias jointly explained 5.9% of the variance in Trust in Media ($R^2 = .059$, $t = 2.265$, $p = .024$; adjusted $R^2 = .052$, $t = 1.990$, $p = .047$). Although both R^2 values were statistically distinguishable from zero, they fall well below Falk and Miller's (1992) 0.10 threshold for a minimally predictive model, foreshadowing the weak effect sizes reported below.

Path coefficients, obtained via bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, are reported in Table 5. Three of the four direct paths were statistically significant. Perceived Media Bias had a significant positive effect on Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.230$, $t = 5.348$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Perceived Media Bias also had a significant positive direct effect on Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.150$, $t = 2.349$, $p = .019$), supporting H2. The Degree of Individual Media Dependency had a significant positive effect on Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.117$, $t = 2.258$, $p = .024$), supporting H3. However, Brand Trust did not significantly predict Trust in Media ($\beta = 0.073$, $t = 1.220$, $p = .222$); H4 was therefore not supported.

Table 5. Structural path coefficients and hypothesis testing (direct effects)

Hypothesis / Path	β	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision	95% CI (BC)
H1: PMB $\rightarrow$ Brand Trust	0.230	0.043	5.348	0.000	Supported	[0.124, 0.300]
H2: PMB $\rightarrow$ Trust in Media	0.150	0.064	2.349	0.019	Supported	[0.000, 0.259]
H3: DIMD $\rightarrow$ Trust in Media	0.117	0.052	2.258	0.024	Supported	[0.014, 0.215]
H4: Brand Trust $\rightarrow$ Trust in Media	0.073	0.060	1.220	0.222	Not Supported	[-0.052, 0.180]

Note. Two-tailed test; significant at $p < .05$, $t > 1.96$. 95% CI (BC) = bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 subsamples); a CI that does not span zero corresponds to a significant path (Hair et al., 2017). PMB = Perceived Media Bias; DIMD = Degree of Individual Media Dependency.

Because the direct path from Brand Trust to Trust in Media was non-significant, the mediation hypothesis was tested but not expected to hold. As shown in Table 6, the specific indirect effect of Perceived Media Bias on Trust in Media through Brand Trust was small and non-significant ($\beta = 0.017$, $t = 1.141$, $p = .254$), with the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval spanning zero [-0.013, 0.046] (Table 6). H5 was therefore not supported: this cross-sectional test found no evidence that Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Perceived Media Bias and Trust in Media in the reversed model. This absence of mediation should be interpreted as evidence against the specific model tested here rather than as definitive proof that brand-level trust can never generalise upward into institutional trust; longitudinal data would be needed to rule out a reciprocal or delayed transfer that a single cross-sectional snapshot cannot detect.

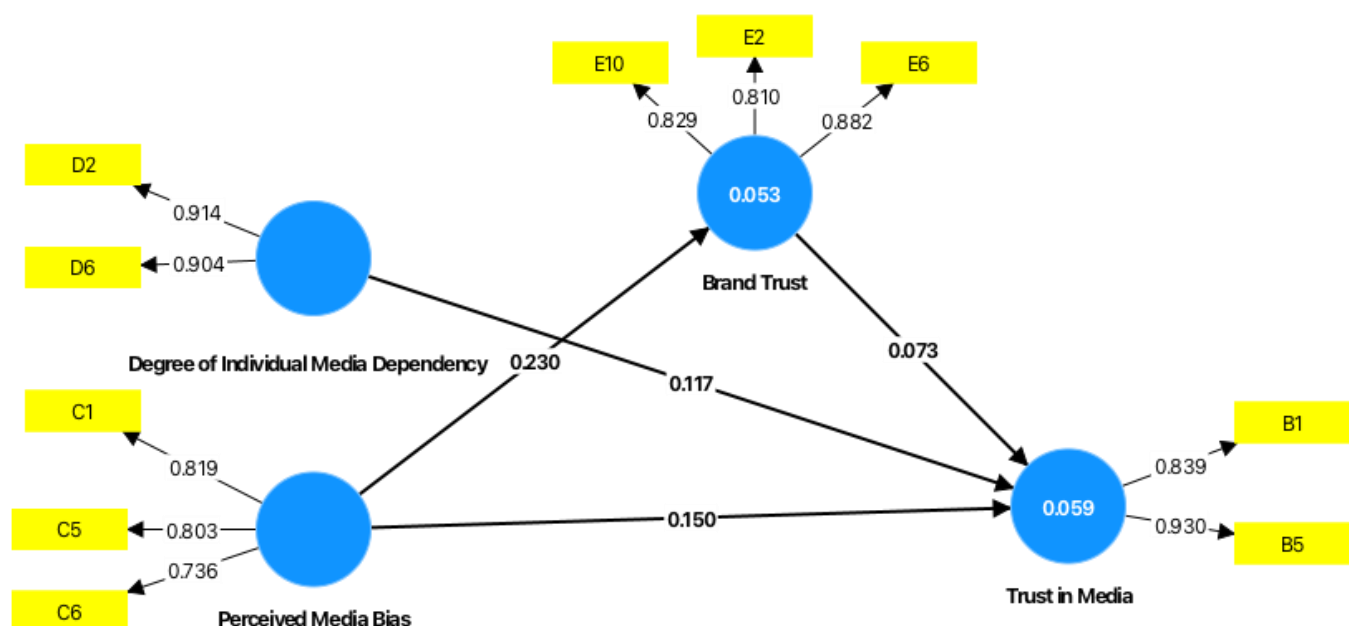


Diagram: Structure Model Analysis

Table 6. Mediation analysis (specific indirect effect)

Hypothesis / Path	β	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision	95% CI (BC)
H5: PMB → Brand Trust → Trust in Media	0.017	0.015	1.141	0.254	Not Supported	[-0.013, 0.046]

Effect sizes (f^2) were computed to gauge the substantive contribution of each predictor independent of statistical significance (Cohen, 1988). As reported in Table 7, only Perceived Media Bias's effect on Brand Trust reached a small effect ($f^2 = 0.056$); its effect on Trust in Media was smaller still ($f^2 = 0.023$), and the effects of the Degree of Individual Media Dependency ($f^2 = 0.011$) and Brand Trust ($f^2 = 0.004$) on Trust in Media fell below the 0.02 threshold conventionally treated as "no effect" (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 7. Effect sizes (f^2)

Path	f^2	SD	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Perceived Media Bias → Brand Trust	0.056	0.023	2.410	0.016	Small
Perceived Media Bias → Trust in Media	0.023	0.021	1.093	0.275	Small (n.s.)
DIMD → Trust in Media	0.011	0.011	1.006	0.315	No effect (n.s.)
Brand Trust → Trust in Media	0.004	0.008	0.538	0.590	No effect (n.s.)

Note. $f^2 \approx 0.02$, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). n.s. = not significant.

Predictive relevance was evaluated using the PLSpredict procedure, which compares out-of-sample prediction errors of the PLS-SEM model against a naive linear regression (LM) benchmark (Shmueli et al., 2019). As shown in Table 8, all indicator-level Q^2_{predict} values were positive (ranging from 0.017 to 0.051), indicating that the model outperforms a mean-based prediction benchmark for every indicator. However, the PLS-SEM root mean square error (RMSE) exceeded the corresponding LM RMSE for all five indicators, meaning that a simple linear regression using the same predictors produced smaller prediction errors than the PLS-SEM path model. Table 9 summarises this pattern at the construct level: both Brand Trust ($Q^2_{\text{predict}} = 0.043$) and Trust in Media ($Q^2_{\text{predict}} = 0.035$) retained positive, though modest, predictive relevance.

Table 8. Indicator-level PLSpredict assessment

Indicator	Q^2_{predict}	PLS-SEM RMSE	PLS-SEM MAE	LM RMSE	LM MAE
E10	0.018	0.817	0.676	0.724	0.553
E2	0.023	0.849	0.673	0.790	0.618

Indicator	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM RMSE	PLS-SEM MAE	LM RMSE	LM MAE
E6	0.051	0.819	0.680	0.751	0.602
B1	0.017	0.762	0.608	0.759	0.600
B5	0.038	0.742	0.613	0.731	0.591

Note. LM = linear model benchmark. E10, E2, E6 = Brand Trust indicators; B1, B5 = Trust in Media indicators.

Table 9. Construct-level PLSpredict assessment

Construct	Q ² predict	RMSE	MAE
Brand Trust	0.043	0.985	0.787
Trust in Media	0.035	0.989	0.820

Table 10 summarises the outcome of hypothesis testing for the reversed model.

Table 10. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Decision
H1	Perceived Media Bias → Brand Trust	Supported
H2	Perceived Media Bias → Trust in Media	Supported
H3	Degree of Individual Media Dependency → Trust in Media	Supported
H4	Brand Trust → Trust in Media	Not Supported
H5	Brand Trust mediates Perceived Media Bias → Trust in Media	Not Supported

DISCUSSION

Perceived Media Bias behaved as a genuine, if modest, driver of both brand-level and institutional trust judgements (H1, H2), and habitual media dependency built during the pandemic was weakly but significantly associated with subsequent institutional trust (H3). These three paths are consistent with the idea that audiences continuously update both their brand preferences and their broader trust judgements based on how biased or useful they perceive their media environment to be, echoing prior work on selective and critical media consumption (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil De Zúñiga, 2017; Zhang, 2021).

The pivotal result, however, is the non-significant effect of Brand Trust on Trust in Media (H4) and the corresponding absence of mediation (H5). This asymmetry is consistent with a compartmentalisation account of trust rather than a generalisation account (Newman et al., 2019; Soomro et al., 2024). Malaysian millennials

in this sample appear able to sustain strong confidence in individual outlets such as Malaysiakini, Berita Harian Online, or The Star without that confidence bleeding into, or being contingent upon, their broader assessment of Malaysian journalism.

The weak explanatory power of the reversed model ($R^2 = .053$ for Brand Trust; $R^2 = .059$ for Trust in Media), together with the finding that a naive linear benchmark predicted the indicators of both constructs with smaller error than the PLS-SEM model, reinforces this interpretation. If Brand Trust and Trust in Media were tightly coupled constructs sitting on a single underlying trust continuum, reversing the causal order should have preserved much of the explanatory strength observed in the original model. Instead, the reversed model explains an order of magnitude less variance than the original DIMD equation ($R^2 = .316$), suggesting that the strong brand-to-dependency relationship identified in the parent study is directionally specific rather than an artefact of shared method variance between correlated trust measures.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to Media System Dependency theory by empirically testing, rather than assuming, the direction of the trust-dependency relationship. The findings indicate that brand-level trust and institutional trust in media are conceptually and empirically distinct layers of audience cognition that do not automatically transfer into one another, at least not within the timeframe and crisis context captured by this cross-sectional design. This refines MSD theory by suggesting that the dependency-generating power of brand trust identified in prior work operates largely independently of, rather than through, generalised institutional trust, a distinction that future MSD models should specify explicitly rather than treat trust as a single undifferentiated construct.

Practical Implications

For media organisations, the compartmentalisation pattern identified here implies that investment in brand-level credibility, such as consistent fact-checking, transparent sourcing, and responsive audience engagement, can be expected to sustain and deepen audience dependency on that specific outlet (as shown in the original model), but should not be relied upon as a strategy for repairing the media industry's broader reputational deficit. Policy interventions aimed at reducing misinformation and rebuilding public trust in journalism as an institution, therefore, likely require industry-wide or cross-outlet initiatives, such as shared verification standards and media literacy programmes, rather than depending on individual brands' credibility efforts to diffuse outward on their own.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the cross-sectional design means that, although the reversed structural model tested whether Brand Trust, Perceived Media Bias, and media dependency predict generalised Trust in Media, the resulting path coefficients describe statistical association at a single point in time and cannot establish the temporal order or causal direction of these relationships. The non-significant path from Brand Trust to Trust in Media (H4) and the corresponding absence of mediation (H5) should therefore be read as evidence against the specific reversed model tested here, not as definitive proof that brand-level trust can never generalise upward into institutional trust under other conditions or over a longer time horizon. Longitudinal designs that track the same respondents across multiple waves, or experimental designs that manipulate exposure to trusted versus untrusted brands, would allow firmer causal claims about the direction, and possible bidirectionality, of the trust-dependency relationship.

Second, the purposive and cluster sampling strategy, which recruited respondents from the Facebook and Instagram followers of three major Malaysian news outlets, means the sample by construction consists of individuals who are already engaged with, and to some degree favourably disposed toward, these specific brands. This engagement-based recruitment may introduce selection bias and limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to Malaysian millennials who do not follow these outlets on social media or who

rely on other news sources entirely. Probability-based sampling from a broader population frame would strengthen the external validity of future replications.

Third, although the measurement model demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Section 4.1), the Perceived Media Bias, Brand Trust, and Degree of Individual Media Dependency scales were adapted and pre-tested for the Malaysian context rather than validated as freestanding instruments in prior peer-reviewed work; future studies could strengthen construct validity further through independent psychometric validation of these adapted scales in additional samples.

Finally, the reversed model explained only a small proportion of variance in both endogenous constructs and showed weak effect sizes and modest predictive relevance (Section 5.2), indicating that unmeasured variables likely play a substantial role in shaping Trust in Media. Future research could examine whether the relationships tested here vary by frequency of media use, preferred news platform, political or social-media engagement, or degree of dependency, and could incorporate additional antecedents, such as perceived source expertise or exposure to misinformation, to improve the explanatory power of the model.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study re-evaluated the complex relationships between Perceived Media Bias, Degree of Individual Media Dependency, Brand Trust, and general Trust in Media among Malaysian millennials in the Klang Valley region. Grounded in Media System Dependency (MSD) theory and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the findings provide critical insights into modern digital news consumption behaviors. Contrary to traditional assumptions that perceiving bias prompts audience disengagement, Perceived Media Bias was found to significantly and directly increase both the Degree of Individual Media Dependency and Brand Trust. Rather than tuning out, critical millennial consumers actively rely on digital media channels to cross-verify facts, utilizing direct trust in specific news brands as an anchor within a biased information landscape. Furthermore, the structural analysis demonstrated that individual media dependency positively predicts general Trust in Media, indicating that continuous interaction with media outlets to fulfill daily cognitive and orientation goals fosters a baseline level of functional confidence in the media system. Crucially, the results revealed a distinct decoupling between brand-level trust and institutional trust. Brand Trust did not exert a statistically significant direct effect on general Trust in Media, nor did it operate as a significant mediating mechanism. This demonstrates that digital-native news consumers compartmentalize their trust—maintaining strong reliance and loyalty toward specific, transparent news brands while retaining a skeptical stance toward the media institution as a whole. Ultimately, media organizations and publishers cannot rely on generalized institutional credibility to retain young audiences; instead, they must focus on brand-level transparency, objective reporting, and editorial integrity to cultivate Brand Trust and secure long-term audience engagement.

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