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Does Usability Manipulate Trust in Fake News?  
Analyzing the Influence of Structural Cues on Initial Trust  
in News Interfaces

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Юзабилити манипулирует доверием к фейк-ньюс?  
Анализ влияния структурных подсказок  
на первичное доверие к новостным интерфейсам

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*Statement of the Problem.* In the age of pervasive digitalization, online news consumption is growing steadily. Simultaneously, tools for creating and spreading fake news are expanding. Previous research highlights the impact of structural usability elements on trust across domains, yet their specific effect on trust in news web interfaces remains inadequately explored.

*The Purpose of the Study.* This study aims to investigate the effect of structural usability cues on users' primary trust in news web interfaces. It seeks to determine which structural elements contribute to trust formation and what limitations may accompany their influence.

*Methods and Respondents.* The study employed an experimental online design. Respondents ( $N = 129$ ) assessed trustworthiness of news web interfaces varying in cue presence/absence, type, and location. Additional independent variables: perceived interface familiarity, initial news quality beliefs, and respondents' demographics.

*Findings.* The presence of structural cues, along with their type and location, had a significant impact on trust in news interfaces, with cued interfaces rated higher than those without cues. Trust also correlated with the perceived familiarity of the interface. Initial beliefs significantly affected trust levels, with participants informed that all news was truthful showing the least trust, possibly due to suspicion evoked by an atypically positive framing.

*Conclusion & Significance.* The study underscores the importance of usability cues in fostering initial trust in digital news interfaces. The results emphasize the role of interface predictability and user expectations in trust dynamics, offering insights for designing trustworthy online media platforms.

*Key words:* usability, trust, human digital interaction, risk perception, online trust, web interfaces

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## 1. Introduction

In the modern world, the web environment has become the primary space for information consumption. The abundance of digital news resources complicates users' choices regarding which sources to trust, making it particularly important to study the formation of initial trust among readers, given the short duration of visits to individual sources.

Previous research shows that the interface significantly influences the initial trust users place in digital information sources (Bhuiyan et al., 2021). Researchers often focus on classifying individual components of web interfaces (see Garrett et al., 2016 for a review), while in-depth studies of their influence on user trust remain less frequent.

This study is carried out within the framework of Kosova and Gorbunova (2023), which identifies four groups of interface trust cues: atmospheric (design), social (human presence illusions), content (informational), and structural – elements determining usability. Usability refers to the interface's capacity to facilitate effective task completion and goal achievement (Jordan, 2020).

The influence of structural usability cues on trust has mainly been studied in commercial interfaces (e.g., Albarq, 2021; Abrar et al., 2017), rarely in the news domain. Exceptions are studies on headline trustworthiness (Munger et al., 2020), which in our framework align more with content cues than structural cues.

News interfaces have specific features – a focus on textual content and a characteristic page structure (navigation bar with thematic breakdown, cross-links to topic-relevant content). Therefore, studying the influence of structural usability cues on initial online trust specifically in news web interfaces is a relevant and timely task.

## 2. Definition and Components of Online Trust

Trust can be regarded as a willingness to rely on another party under conditions of uncertainty and risk (Rotter, 1980; McKnight & Chervany, 1996). This phenomenon is a fundamental component of human interactions, both offline and online.

There are numerous interpretations of the trust phenomenon, driven by several factors. Firstly, the concept of trust is abstract and often used interchangeably with other related concepts such as reliability (O'Neill, 2018) or willingness to rely on others (Lindgreen, 2003). In the context of news media, the term trust is regularly conflated with credibility (e.g., Tsfaty & Cappella, 2003) and truthfulness (e.g., Zaryan, 2017). Secondly, trust is a multifaceted concept that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Lewis & Weigert, 2012). Thirdly, trust in offline and online environments appears to differ in their formation mechanisms due to the unique factors and conditions of digital environments.

Traditionally, offline trust is often based on direct, physical interactions, where non-verbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice, play significant roles. Websites and digital platforms often provide limited information about counterparties. Such scenarios, trust is more strongly affected by elements like user reviews and ratings (Sebastianelli & Tamimi, 2018; Sung et al., 2023), visual design (Kim & Moon, 1998; Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004), and interface functionality (Acemyan & Kortum, 2012; Salanitri et al., 2015).

In analyzing the common characteristics of trust in online and offline environments, Kosova (2025) identifies three primary dimensions of online trust components: organizational, cognitive, and affective. The organizational aspects of trust involve multiple parties (the trustor and the trustee). Cognitive elements include expected benefits from trust, consistency and predictability of behavior. (Evans & Krueger, 2011; McKnight et al., 2002). Affective components are tied to empathetic behavior from both the trustor and trustee (Cikara et al., 2011; Huang & Murnighan, 2010).

Within this study, we emphasize two conditions for trust formation: risk/vulnerability and situational normality. In scholarly works, the concept of risk is noted as a key element in understanding trust (e.g., Lewis and Weigert, 1985). In online environments, high anonymity raises risks for users – primarily privacy and security threats (McCole et al., 2010; Friedman et al., 2000). Situational normality refers to the initial assessment of likely successful interaction based on perceived familiarity (Cho et al., 2007): users trust more when conditions seem typical and predictable (Gefen et al., 2003), and prior experience with similar interfaces bolsters trust in the current site via trust transfer effects.

In the news media context, situational normality manifests through expectations of journalistic standards (source citation, balanced viewpoints, fact-checking), stylistic and thematic consistency, and familiar placement of structural elements (e.g., a navigation bar in the top panel). We expect

mainstream media (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014) to adhere to prevailing social norms, while alternative outlets may deviate. Deviations from expected behaviors create a sense of abnormality that diminishes trust.

### 3. Structural Usability Cues and Their Influence on Trust

Usability refers to the ease and effectiveness with which users achieve their goals when interacting with digital systems. Its core parameters include learnability, efficiency, simplicity of core functions, error prevention, and user satisfaction (Nielsen & Hackos, 1993; Esmaceli et al., 2021). Unlike visual design, which is largely passively perceived, usability manifests through active user interaction (Kosova & Gorbunova, 2023). Higher usability is typically associated with reduced complexity and is considered a key predictor of technology adoption (Davis, 1989; Peiris et al., 2015; Kaabachi et al., 2019). At the same time, users often rely on surface-level cues, such as ease of use, rather than in-depth content analysis (Fogg, 2003).

The influence of usability on trust can be theoretically grounded in three complementary mechanisms: (1) perceived ease of use and usefulness (Davis, 1989; Kumar & Sareen, 2012); (2) reduction of cognitive load through simplified interaction (Guo et al., 2023; Peiris et al., 2015); and (3) alignment of system characteristics with user expectations. These mechanisms are non-contradictory and likely operate jointly, shaping users' cognitive and affective responses to an interface.

Empirical evidence on the usability–trust relationship is not entirely uniform. For example, Pravettoni et al. (2007) found that usability did not significantly affect either the use of online banking or institutional trust, which may be explained by the early stage of technology adoption and generalized distrust toward the medium itself. In contrast, Casaló et al. (2007), using a more demographically diverse sample, reported a positive relationship between usability and trust. Importantly, user experience moderates this relationship: for less experienced users, usability may function as an anticipated barrier, whereas for more experienced users, trust is shaped less by interface characteristics and more by attitudes toward the system or institution. This suggests that expectations, formed through prior interaction, play a critical role in linking usability and trust.

Overall, three non-exclusive research directions can be identified. First, usability is often found to have a direct positive effect on trust across domains such as virtual reality, online banking, and e-commerce (e.g., Salanitri et al., 2015; Kaabachi et al., 2019; Acemyan & Kortum, 2012; Al-Kfairy et al., 2023). Second, usability may influence trust indirectly through mediating

variables such as user satisfaction (Flavián et al., 2006; Guo et al., 2023). Third, usability and trust jointly contribute to behavioral outcomes, including user loyalty and intention to use or purchase (Esmaeili et al., 2021; Peiris et al., 2015; Kaabachi et al., 2019).

At the same time, the relationship between usability and trust is shaped by cultural context. Cyr (2008) demonstrated that information, visual, and navigational design significantly influenced trust in a combined sample; however, their effects varied across countries. For instance, visual design was not significant in Canada, information design in China, and no significant effects were found in Germany. Similarly, Bauman (2016) identified usability, design, and sales-related cues as universal across Germany, Russia, and the United States, while other factors varied: Russian users placed greater importance on customer reviews and social media links, whereas security cues were more salient for American and German users. These findings highlight cultural specificity as an important moderating factor in the usability–trust relationship

## 4. Current Study

### 4.1. Variables and Hypotheses

The objective of this study is to examine whether typical structural usability cues in news interfaces impact the initial trust level towards these interfaces. The key dependent variable is the average level of initial trust, measured using a 6-point Likert scale. We hypothesize that trust may be influenced by both cue presence and cue type, leading to the first two hypotheses:

**H1.** The average trust level of a user towards a news web interface containing a structural cue is higher than towards a news web interface lacking structural cues.

**H2.** The average trust level in a news web interface depends on the type of structural cues present.

Since expectations of the trusting party are reflected through criteria like situational normality, we verify whether structural usability cues independently influence trust rather than merely due to user familiarity:

**H3.** The average trust level in a news web interface depends on the normality of the placement of structural cues.

**H4.** There is a statistically significant correlation between the user's trust level in a news web interface and their familiarity with that interface.

Finally, as discussions involving trust in news often bring up issues of confirmation bias and other cognitive distortions related to user expectations from the content of a news source (e.g., Klayman & Ha, 1987; Metzger

et al., 2010; Fischer et al., 2005; Van der Meer et al., 2020), we decided to control for users' preliminary expectations of the content and introduced an additional hypothesis:

**H5.** The preliminary belief regarding the source's tendency to publish truthful or fake news will have a statistically significant impact on trust.

## 4.2. Participants

The final sample for the study included 129 respondents aged 18 to 35 years (mean age 20.78; 90 females), who reported no diagnosed neurological or mental disorders. All participants were native Russian speakers. Prior to the experiment, all respondents provided informed consent to participate.

## 4.3. Materials

Through a preliminary desk study of Russian and international news websites (including the top 30 Russian sites by Medialogia's citation rate as of 2024), four main types of structural cues specific to news sites were identified. Structural cues were defined as interface elements designed to help users better understand the structure and logic of interaction with the site.

**Navigation Bar:** A block or row of links providing comprehensive site navigation; often also plays the role of thematic navigator throughout the media.

*Typical Location:* The upper part (the header) of the site before the main news article text, spanning the full width of the screen.

**Illustrative Element:** Typically an image (a photograph, or less frequently, an illustration created by an artist or a generated image, also potentially a video) illustrating the article's theme or main idea.

*Typical Location:* Predominantly located after the news article's headline, before the main text, usually matched in width to the main text.

**Content Feed:** A separate block, usually rectangular, containing links to the most current news within the site (often includes news headlines and their publication time).

*Typical Location:* Separated from the main article text, with two common placements – on the left or right side of the site concerning the main text.

**Related News Block:** A structural cue containing links to one or several news items on the same topic as the main article, often featuring an accompanying photo.

*Typical Location:* Inserted within the main article text as a colored block, dividing the article into two parts.

Stimulus materials consisted of screenshots of news web interface mock-ups created in Figma based on public templates. Three news portal templates were developed and pre-equalized for trustworthiness. To enhance realism, they were populated with specially written fake news, neutral in emotional tone and also pre-equalized for trustworthiness. Manipulated variables: cue presence (one cue per display), cue type, and cue location (typical or atypical).

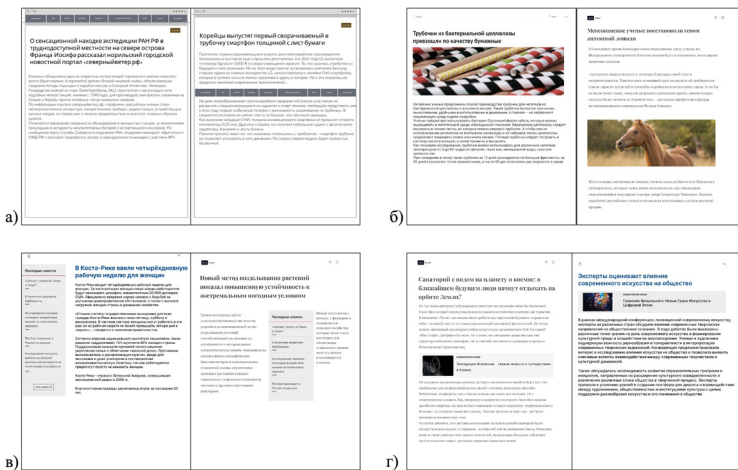


Fig. 1. Examples of Stimuli

*Note:* a) Navigation Bar; b) Illustrative Element; c) Content Feed; d) Related News Block. The first image in the pair shows the typical placement, while the second image shows the atypical placement of the cue.

A total of 27 designs of news web interfaces containing one of the types of structural cues were created. Additionally, 9 web interfaces were developed without structural cues. For the illustrative element and related news, 6 designs each were created, with two featuring cues in the typical location and four in atypical locations. For the content feed, 6 designs were created, four with typical placement, and two without. For the navigation bar, 9 designs were created, with three placing the cue in a typical location.

Thus, the overall experiment structure can be described as four-factorial: 2 (cue presence)  $\times$  4 (cue type)  $\times$  2 (cue location: typical/atypical)  $\times$  3 (preliminary belief: fake/truthful/control). The independent variables were divided into two groups and analyzed sequentially in two two-factor analy-

ses: first, cue presence and respondent's preliminary belief, followed by cue location and cue type.

#### **4.4. Procedure**

The study was conducted online. Before the main part, respondents completed demographic (gender, age, education) and behavioral questionnaires on news consumption habits (frequency, tendency to double-check news, approach to source selection).

Each respondent received an initial framing (preliminary belief) about the news quality in the stimulus materials:

- Group: All news in this survey is fake.
- Group: All news in this survey is true.
- Control Group: No preliminary framing.

The division into groups allowed, on the one hand, better control over respondents' opinions regarding the quality of the news on the evaluated screenshots, and on the other hand, it facilitated determining whether the initial framing influenced respondents' responses in evaluating news sources.

This division allowed control over respondents' opinions and facilitated determining whether initial framing influenced trust ratings.

Regardless of belief group, participants played the role of editor-in-chief for a news aggregator selecting sources based on their interfaces. A risk element was stated: responsible performance could earn entry into a financial prize draw, while selecting untrustworthy interfaces would forfeit this opportunity.

In the main experimental part, interfaces were presented in random order. For each, respondents rated trust on a 6-point scale, rated familiarity on a similar scale, and gave a binary indication of whether they would include the source in their aggregator. A control question about the initial framing was included; only those who answered this question correctly were included in the final sample.

#### **4.5. Results**

##### **4.5.1. Main Dependent Variable and Analysis**

The main dependent variable was the average level of trust that respondents had in the stimulus interfaces, measured on a 6-point Likert scale (where 1 indicates complete distrust, and 6 indicates complete trust). The primary independent variables included the presence of a structural cue, the type of cue, its location, and the type of initial belief (framing).

Additionally, demographic and behavioral characteristics were assessed as covariates. The correlation between trust levels and interface familiarity for respondents was also examined.

Initially, a two-factor model assessed the individual and combined effects of cue presence and belief type. Upon confirming the influence of cue presence, an additional two-factor analysis was conducted to examine the role of cue type and location. Preliminary tests: Shapiro-Wilk (normality) and Levene's test (equality of variances).

#### 4.5.2. First Stage Analysis: Cue Presence and Preliminary Belief

A mixed-design ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction (cue presence as within-group, belief type as between-group) showed that both variables and their interaction significantly influenced average trust (Table 1). The cue presence effect was substantial ( $\eta^2 = 0.256$ ); belief type and interaction had small effects. Users displayed greater trust in interfaces containing a structural cue: the average trust for interfaces with a cue was  $3.44 (\pm 0.63)$ , whereas for those without, it was  $2.57 (\pm 0.89)$ . The Wilcoxon  $p$ -value was  $< 0.001$ , and Hedges'  $g$  effect size was 1.132, indicating a very large difference between groups.

**Table 1.** Analysis of the Influence of Cue Presence and Belief Type on Average Trust in News Web Interfaces

Variable	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square Deviations	F-statistic	p-value	Generalized eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ )	Sphericity Correction (Epsilon)
Belief Type	6.694	2, 126	3.347	3.733	0.027	0.045	N/A
Cue Presence	49.156	1, 126	49.156	209.229	$< 0.001$	0.256	1
Interaction	1.974	2, 126	0.987	4.202	0.017	0.014	N/A

Post-hoc analysis (Dunn's test, Benjamini-Hochberg FDR) showed significant differences between control and "truthful" groups ( $p = 0.03$ ; Hedges'  $g = 0.364$ ), as well as between the "truthful" and "fake" news groups ( $p = 0.03$ ;  $g = 0.381$ ); no difference was found between the "fake" and control groups ( $p = 0.953$ ). Notably, the "truthful" group showed the lowest level of trust (average trust  $2.82 \pm 0.85$ ; the "fake" group registered  $3.15 \pm 0.91$ ; the control group  $3.13 \pm 0.84$ ).

The interaction effect was also assessed via post-hoc Dunn's test (Figure 2).

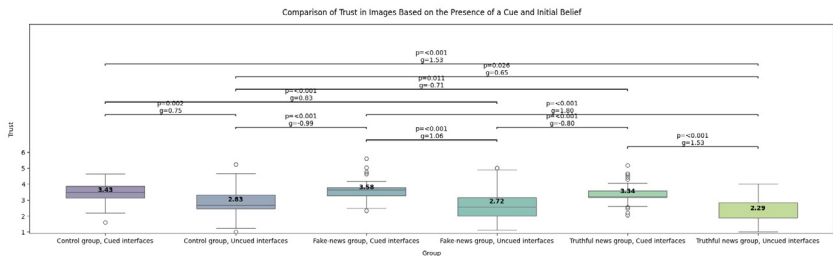


Fig. 2. Combined Influence of Cue Presence and Belief Type on Average Trust in News Web Interfaces

4.5.3. Second Stage Analysis: Cue Type and Cue Location

Since cue presence had a substantial impact, the second stage used repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction (rmANOVA) to evaluate cue type and location, considering only interfaces with cues. Both variables and their interaction significantly influenced trust, with medium effect sizes (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis of the Influence of Structural Cue Type and Location on Average Trust in News Web Interfaces

Variable	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square Deviations	F-statistic	P-value (adjusted)	Generalized eta-squared ( $\eta^2_g$ )	Sphericity Correction (Epsilon)
Cue Type	80.247	3, 384	26.749	37.910	< 0.001	0.079	0.906
Cue Location	59.037	1, 128	59.037	100.661	< 0.001	0.059	1
Interaction	77.993	3, 384	25.998	59.188	< 0.001	0.077	0.916

Post-hoc analysis of cue types was also conducted using Dunn’s method with Benjamini-Hochberg FDR correction. The analysis results, shown in Figure 3, highlight that interfaces containing the Related News block demonstrated the highest level of trust, whereas those with the navigation bar exhibited the lowest trust levels.

The analysis showed that users statistically significantly trust interfaces more when the cue is in a typical location. The average trust in interfaces with typically placed cues was 3.70 ( $\pm 1.07$ ), compared to 3.22 ( $\pm 0.99$ ) for atypically placed cues; the Wilcoxon p-value was <0.001, and Hedges’g effect size was 0.464, indicating a small but notable influence.

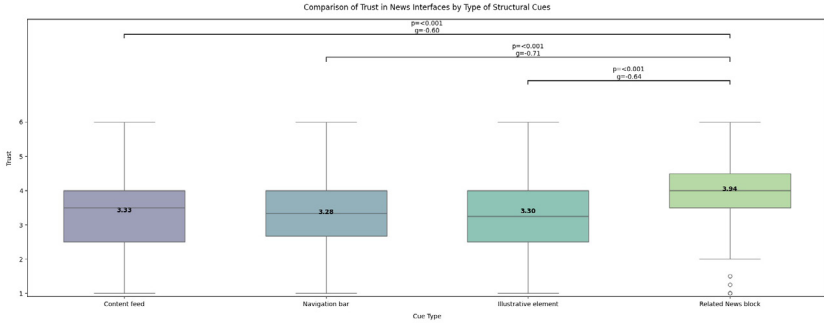


Fig. 3. Comparison of Average Trust with Different Types of Structural Cues

Figure 4 shows pairwise comparisons for the combined influence of cue type and location. Notably, for the Navigation bar and Content feed, location typicality was highly significant ( $g > 1$ ), whereas for the Related News block and Illustrative element, location had no statistically significant effect.

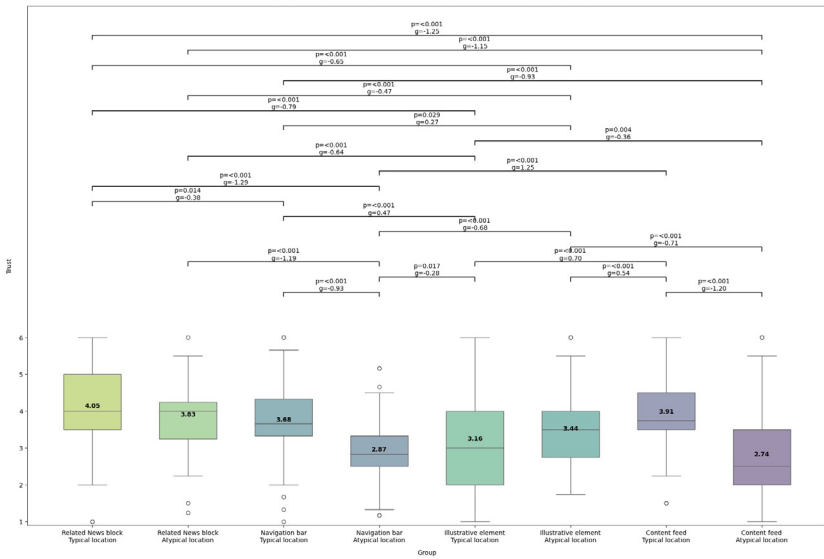


Fig. 4. Combined Influence of Cue Type and Location on Trust in News Web Interfaces

#### 4.5.4. Correlational Analysis: Trust and Interface Familiarity

Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated between average trust ratings and interface familiarity ratings for each respondent. Results (Figure 5) indicate a moderate positive correlation, supporting the role of situational normality and user expectations in trust formation.

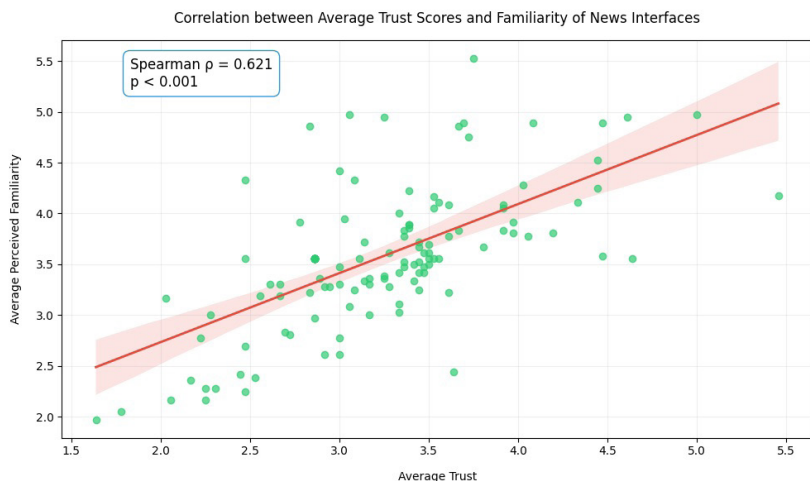


Fig. 5. Correlation between Interface Familiarity and Trust

#### 4.5.5. Behavioral and Demographic Analysis

Behavioral and demographic factors (gender, age, education, news consumption habits) were analyzed using ANCOVA and regression. None had a statistically significant impact on average trust ( $p > 0.1$  in all cases), confirming that individual user characteristics play a minor role in trust toward news interfaces.

### 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the influence of structural usability cues in news web interfaces on initial user trust. Several key findings emerged.

Firstly, the presence of structural usability cues significantly increases initial trust, consistent with prior findings in e-commerce and online banking (e.g., Casaló et al., 2007; Al-Kfairy et al., 2023). This underscores the broader importance of structural interface elements in trust perception. This result underscores the importance of usability and supports the

theoretical notion that structural elements can enhance the perception of websites.

Secondly, trust varied by cue type: the Related News block generated the highest trust, while the Navigation bar generated the lowest. For Navigation bars and Content feeds, typical placement was crucial for trust (trust decreased for atypical placements), whereas for Related News and Illustrative elements, location had no significant effect. Related News blocks may enhance perceived content relevance and contextual consistency, fostering confidence in the interface. However, this raises concerns about the filter bubble phenomenon (Rhodes, 2022): algorithmic contextual recommendations may lock readers into a homogeneous informational environment, reducing critical thinking (Zhang et al., 2023).

Thirdly, we confirmed that the level of trust in an interface is directly related to how familiar or typical that interface appears to the user. Since all interfaces were created specifically for this study, respondents assessed familiarity based on prior experience with similar interfaces – reflecting their expectations of situationally appropriate behavior. Both overall interface typicality and typical cue placement were linked to trust levels, consistent with predictability and expectation concepts (Cho et al., 2007).

Fourth, initial beliefs about news truthfulness significantly influenced trust. The preliminary framing created an external set in Uznadze's (1958) sense – a readiness to act based on prior experience. Participants told all news was true showed the lowest trust levels, presumably because an overly positive framing, atypical for digital reality, aroused suspicion and prompted more critical evaluation.

Finally, regarding demographic and behavioral factors, our study found no significant impact on trust. This suggests that essential aspects of usability and contextual expectation might play a more significant role in trusting news interfaces than individual user characteristics.

Limitations include the use of static screenshots (not capturing dynamic interaction) and a predominantly young sample (limiting generalizability). Future research could explore dynamic interface elements and cross-cultural samples. In conclusion, our findings underscore the importance of structural usability cues in forming initial user trust towards news interfaces, with practical implications for trustworthy online media design.

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Осипова В.В., Косова Е.М.

Юзабилити манипулирует доверием к фейк-ньюс?

Анализ влияния структурных подсказок на первичное доверие к новостным интерфейсам

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*Актуальность.* В эпоху повсеместной цифровизации доля потребления новостей через онлайн-ресурсы неуклонно растет. Одновременно увеличивается и инструментарий по созданию и распространению фейк-ньюс. Все это делает задачу по изучению механизмов доверия к новостям в онлайн-среде критически важной. Предыдущие исследования подчеркивают влияние структурных элементов юзабилити на доверие к интерфейсам из разных тематических доменов, однако их воздействие на доверие именно к новостным веб-интерфейсам остается недостаточно изученным.

*Цель.* Данное исследование нацелено на изучение влияния структурных подсказок юзабилити на первичное доверие пользователей к новостным веб-интерфейсам. Исследование стремится выявить, какие структурные элементы способствуют формированию доверия и какие ограничения имеет это влияние.

*Методы.* Исследование имело экспериментальный дизайн и проводилось в онлайн-формате. Респонденты ( $N = 129$ ) оценивали степень доверия к новостным веб-интерфейсам, варьирувавшимся по наличию/отсутствию подсказки, типу подсказки, местоположению подсказки. Дополнительными независимыми переменными служили воспринимаемая привычность интерфейса, предварительные установки о качестве новостей, демографические и поведенческие характеристики респондентов.

*Результаты.* Наличие структурных подсказок, а также их тип и расположение в интерфейсе, оказали значительное влияние на доверие к новостным интерфейсам, причем интерфейсы с подсказками оценивались выше, чем без них. Доверие также коррелировало с воспринимаемой привычностью интерфейса. Предварительные установки существенно влияли на уровень доверия: участники, которым сообщалось, что все новости правдивы, демонстрировали наименьший уровень доверия, возможно, из-за подозрения, вызванного нетипичной положительной установкой.

*Выводы.* Исследование подчеркивает важность юзабилити-подсказок в формировании первичного доверия к цифровым новостным интерфейсам. Результаты акцентируют внимание на роли предсказуемости интерфейса и ожиданий пользователей в динамике доверия, предлагая инсайты для разработки надежных онлайн-медиа платформ. Понимание этих динамик может помочь в создании интерфейсов, которые не только привлекают, но и сохраняют доверие пользователей в условиях растущего потока цифровой информации.

*Ключевые слова:* юзабилити, доверие, человек-цифровое взаимодействие, восприятие риска, онлайн-доверие, веб-интерфейсы

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