EXPLORING AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONAL TRUST IN JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

There is little research on the topic of how relationships impact audience trust in news. This thesis provides a novel empirical exploration of how audiences perceive their relationships with journalism and how these relationships impact trust in news. Using a survey of n=1,175 US adults, this research captured both quantitative and qualitative data to operationalize the concept of relational trust and determine how relationships are related to various components of trust in news. Relational trust was measured based on five key components: respect, listening, confidence, comfort, and commitment. Overall, the various relational trust factors were consistently strongly positively correlated with all measures of both general and specific trust, which supports the theory that relational trust is a component of trust. Audiences organically described their relationships with news outlets in terms of the service being provided and common journalistic norms like unbiased, factual, and accurate. However, audiences also indicated considerable comfort and confidence directed toward news providers they consumed. If building relationships is not a part of the typical journalistic discourse, then consumers may not have relationships as top of mind when they think about their interactions with news. In these cases, relational trust is an underlying sentiment. The data show evidence that even people with lower levels of general trust in news, like Republicans, would be receptive to relational work interactions with journalists. In fact, the evidence suggests that they are significantly more likely to believe journalists should be doing more in terms of
relationship building. Based on the results, this thesis argues that relationships between audiences and journalists/news organizations are a unique and important component of trust in news. As such, improving relationship quality theoretically could lead to healthier perceptions of trust in news.
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Trust in news continues to be at a critical juncture in society. As Gallup reported as recently as October 2023, trust in news has once again dropped to a 2016-era low (Brenan, 2023). Low media trust is tied to increasing polarization, a rise in disinformation, economic impacts, and social division (Edelman, 2023). As low trust continues to dominate the discourse around news media, journalism practitioners and scholars continue to seek novel ways of understanding trust in hopes of improving it.

One promising emerging topic in the field of journalism studies is relational trust. Previous literature has pointed out how the emotional and relational components of trust are often ignored (Richards, 2009; Beckett and Deuze, 2016; Engdahl and Lidskog, 2014). Recent rethinking of trust has recommended shifting away from a focus on cognitive evaluations of trust through values like objectivity, accuracy, etc. and toward how relationships can foster trust (Wenzel, 2020; Kunnel, 2021; Koliska et al., 2023). There is little extant literature on relational trust and its implications for journalism. The work that does exist points to a promising opportunity to refine how we understand relationships between consumers and journalists, and how relationships contribute to news trust (Wenzel, 2020; Koliska et al., 2023).

This research will explore how relationships between audiences and journalists are perceived from the audience’s perspective. Given how little exists on the topic, this is an exploratory study designed to provide insights into how relationship quality can impact perceptions of trust in news. This research examines how people interact with news organizations and think about their relationships with news outlets, specifically as it relates to trust in news. This survey asked participants what their news trust levels are,
what kinds of relationships they have had with journalists, and how open they are to relational work. The findings can help inform future work on trust in news measurement and provide direction for journalism practitioners to implement relational work.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Crisis of Trust in Journalism

As Newman et al. (2021) have shown, the crisis of trust in journalism has been well documented, as has the need for new ways of understanding trust. Trust levels in the US continue to be historically low (Gallup, 2023). Katherine Fink called this lack of public trust the “single biggest challenge facing journalism today” (Fink, 2019, p.40), as the public relies on journalists not only to provide information, but also to create a shared understanding of current events (Ardia et al., 2020). As Edelman (2023) have documented, low trust levels are associated with increasing societal polarization, the spread of disinformation, economic anxiety, and ultimately social division. Polarization and societal divides are particularly apparent when looking at trust across political affiliations. The trust gap between Republicans and Democrats continues to widen: as of October 2022, Gallup found that 70% of Democrats trusting news in general while only 14% of Republicans trust news in general (Brenan, 2022). Political party is a major variable that influences how audiences perceive journalism and subsequently trust in news. Therefore, political party will be analyzed in this study.

Rethinking Trust

In response to the crisis of trust, the field of journalism studies has proposed new ways of conceptualizing trust. Some have rightfully questioned assumptions about trust and how the focus on measuring trust can distract from creating a cohesive, agreed-upon definition of trust (Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The general concept of trust defined by Fisher and utilized in this research is that people are believing in the reliability and truth of news (Fisher, 2016, p. 24). Other scholars like Usher (2018) have
recommended focusing on how audiences and news producers interact in the physical world. Usher argues that to understand trust, scholars need to adopt new objects of analyses to understand these interactions. For example, by examining news buildings, one can better understand how the work of journalism is visible to the public and how news organizations convey authority.

These arguments center on relationships and how journalists interact with the public. The field of sociology has long emphasized the notion that trust is a social construct that makes social relationships easier, as everyone cannot know everything at once and therefore must trust others who have the knowledge they do not (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). In the context of journalism, consumers need to trust journalists and news organizations to provide information and fulfill their democratic function (Richards, 2009). As Lewis and Weigert (1985) point out, a lot of trust research can lose sight of this relational component. Journalism research is no exception to this trend. A large amount of trust research focuses on how audiences perceive trust in terms of accuracy, objectivity, etc (see Koliska et al., p.6). In other words, these conceptualizations of trust focus on how audiences evaluate the truthfulness of the information. While important, this emphasis on cognitive evaluations of trust often overlooks the importance of interactions between audiences and journalists that frame cognitive and emotional evaluations of trust (Engdahl and Lidskog, 2014).

**Relational Trust**

The notion that relationships can impact, on the other hand, highlights how interactions with journalists can impact evaluations of journalism. The concepts of relational journalism (Lewis, 2019) and relational trust (Kunnel and Quandt, 2016) are
central to this research. Relational journalism is defined by Lewis (2019) as a form of journalism work that focuses on “building and maintaining of relationships with publics it normatively serves” (p. 47). Lewis proposes that a solutions-oriented and relationship-driven approach to journalism could begin to address the divide between audiences and journalists. As consumers, audiences already have a transactional relationship with journalism. However, relational journalism goes a step further to prioritize additional interactions with the public and relationship-building. Here, Lewis emphasizes that building stronger relationships with the public can help journalists be more connected and understanding of the communities they report on. The benefits of relationship-building are also a two-way street. If journalists are working to ensure they understand audiences better, audiences will also feel better understood.

Relational journalism, and relationship-building in general, can have positive impacts for audiences – especially when it comes to trust. Lewis tied his theory of relational journalism back to trust, claiming that relational journalism could help improve journalism’s standing with the public. Recently several scholars have constructed theories of relational trust, which explain how trust can be developed through relationship-building. Kunnel and Quandt (2016) offer a conceptual framework for relational trust, where they explain how repeated interactions between two people allows them to develop a shared identity between the two. Relational trust develops as part of this shared identity and forms the basis for how both interactants will interpret future interactions. If more relational trust is present, it can allow for a relationship to continue to grow. The theory of relational trust says that a series of personal interactions can help establish a closer relationship - and therefore trust - between the two people interacting.
Koliska et al. (2023) build off this idea and propose that journalists are already having various types of interactions with the public that could contribute to a sense of relational trust in journalism. The following definition of relational trust used for this research was taken from Koliska et al. For the purposes of this paper, relational trust as it pertains to journalism is defined as “bonds (experienced or imagined) between journalists/news organizations and their audiences, developed via interpersonal interactions initiated by journalism professionals to create assurance, confidence, and respect among the public” (Koliska et al., 2023, p.10). In this definition, relational trust is established through these interpersonal interactions with journalists and is characterized by audiences feeling assured, confident, and respected. Importantly, Koliska et al. explain that relational trust is not the only factor in overall trust. Rather, it is a piece of the overall picture of trust.

Measuring relational trust helps determine two things: first, it provides an opportunity to operationalize and observe the concept of relational trust in comparison to other trust measures. Second, it allows for a novel, quantitative understanding of audience relationships with journalism that have previously been under-emphasized in trust measurement. The first research question focuses on understanding exactly how relational trust is related to trust in news overall.

**RQ1:** How is relational trust related to trust in news?

**Audience Studies**

The vast field of audience studies emphasizes the influence that audiences have on the media they consume. In the context of news, audience studies literature shifts the object of analysis from the point of creation (typically defined as news or newsrooms in
journalism studies) to encompass how audiences are receiving and interpreting the news content provided. Hall’s classic encoder/decoder communication model provides a framework for how trust in journalism has traditionally been defined by audiences for themselves (Hall, [1980] 2003). The audience studies approach is useful for understanding how interactions with journalists might be interpreted in the context of news consumption overall. Recent work from scholars like Costera Meijer (2020) has suggested that the field of journalism is increasingly turning towards audience feedback to inform the news production process. The concept of encouraging audience engagement online and using it as a metric for success, for example, has become commonplace in newsrooms. The recent focus on incorporating audience feedback suggests newsrooms are open to the kinds of reciprocal, continuous relationships with audiences that are essential to maintaining trust long-term (Costera Meijer, 2020). The second research question builds off the audience studies approach to explore how audiences are perceiving their relationships with journalism, and what role relational trust is currently playing.

**RQ 2: How are audiences perceiving their own relationships with journalism?**

Relational Work

Previous research has shown that consumers can feel disconnected from news organizations and the story production process (Peifer and Partain, 2023). Relational work may be one route to counteract this disconnect. As Peifer and Partain (2023) demonstrate with their empirical research, providing opportunities for audiences to meet their local journalists and learn about journalism-related issues facing their community can generate greater feelings of connection and trust with journalism. Many journalists
and newsrooms are already conducting relational work in the form of engaged reporting, outreach, and embedding themselves in the communities they serve (Koliska et al. 2023). Data also shows that local news sources have a large role to play in relationship building and trust, given how much relational work they are conducting in communities. More interactions with local news, like being interviewed for a story or seeing a news van in their neighborhood for instance, has been linked to higher trust in local news (Ritter and Standridge, 2019). Skippage (2020) also recommends establishing trusted information networks by leveraging trusted local connections, as well as creating local crowdsourcing communities to report disinformation to journalists. Examining these various kinds of relational work provides an opportunity to explore how journalists can initiate building relational trust with audiences.

**Audience Engagement**

Relational work is also part of a larger trend of audience engagement efforts that journalists are already conducting. Along with the digital transformation of the news industry comes new ways of engaging the audience in the journalistic process (Borger and Sanders, 2016; Wenzel, 2020; Zahay et al., 2021). Online engagement for instance can be a component of relationship-building between audience members and journalists, as suggested by Koliska et al. (2023). With all these new ways of engaging, Nelson (2021) identifies the need to distinguish between various forms of audience engagement, paying special attention to differences in whether the engagement happens during news production or in reception. Some forms of engagement such as likes and shares of news articles on social media are quite low-effort and commonplace (Koliska et al., 2023, p.11). These kinds of engagement, as will be argued later in this thesis, are not
necessarily always the best indicators of relationship quality nor are they enough to establish actual relationships on their own. The final research question aims to understand the interplay between relational work and trust in news. Specifically, this research seeks to understand how receptive and open audiences might be to more relational work, and whether more experiences with relational work might be associated with more trust in news.

**RQ3:** How is relational work related to audience perceptions of trust in news?
CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Grounded Theory Approach

Given how little research exists on the topic of identifying and measuring relational trust, especially in a journalism context, this study employed the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory allows for the further development of the relational trust theory and measurement techniques without imposing preconceived notions of consumers’ experiences of relational trust. This reflects the audience studies approach common in other literature, and grounded theory is also commonly used in the field of digital journalism studies (Steensen and Ahva, 2015). The survey design also included an opportunity for open-ended questions so that respondents could share their experiences in their own words. This combination allows for the research to capture both qualitative and quantitative data. Future work can employ other more structured research methods to test the relational trust construct and build off these exploratory findings.

Research Design

To capture data, the survey was fielded over the course of three days, November 6th through 8th, 2023. The survey quota was set at n=1200 to ensure a robust analyzable sample for this study and to provide data along with potential interviewees for future studies. A pilot study was first conducted, and then after reaching the n=1200 respondent quota, response collection was stopped. The survey was programmed in Qualtrics and fielded to respondents through CloudResearch’s Connect platform. Connect is a research crowdsourcing platform where individuals can sign up to complete virtual research tasks - such as surveys - and receive a monetary reward for each task successfully completed. Researchers can sign up to create an account to field task requests to participants.
Although relatively new, Connect has already been explored by researchers and established itself as a reliable source of quality data (Douglas et al., 2023).

Participants reviewed a short consent form describing the study, then answered a 10-minute survey about their experiences with trust in news and interactions relationships with news outlets. They then provided some basic demographic data and were asked whether they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. If interested, they provided their Connect ID so researchers may contact them at a later date for interview requests. Participants were paid $1.50 if they successfully completed the survey.

**Measurement**

The survey measured trust as the dependent variable and three categories of relational aspects that are theorized to be important to trust as independent variables: relational trust factors, audience descriptions of relationships, and relational work.

**Dependent Variable**

**Trust.** To provide a baseline to evaluate RQ1, the survey built off previous trust in news scales (Meyer, 1988; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020) to operationalize measuring trust in news. Trust was asked about in a variety of ways but followed the same wording of “How much trust do you have in [object of trust]”. As recommended by Strömbäck et al. (2020) the object of trust was specified as either “news in general” to measure general trust, or a specific source of information to measure specific trust, which included trust in a “journalists”, “news you consume”, or a specific media type, i.e. “news from social media”. Answer categories of trust were borrowed from Pew (2022) and Gallup (Brenan, 2023), and were as follows: a great amount of trust, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, and none at all.
Independent Variables

Relational Trust Factors. While there are a multitude of overlapping components of trust, and relational components are some of the least fleshed out in the current trust literature. To evaluate RQ1, several different modes of survey questions were chosen: a matrix agree/disagree scale and open-ended questions. For the matrix questions, five different factors of trust were identified that encapsulate the characteristics of relational trust and other relationship measures: respect, listening, confidence, comfort, and commitment. Respect and confidence come from the definition by Koliska et al. (2023). Commitment was used as a synonym for assurance, which is taken from Koliska et al.’s definition, as it had less potential to be misinterpreted by respondents in context. Koliska et al. also point out how Hon and Gruning (1999) used commitment as one of the terms to describe the effectiveness of public relations campaigns. Costa Meijer (2022) highlights the importance of audiences feeling listened to by journalists, and Koliska et al. (2023) recommended the term listening as a potential factor of relational trust. Finally, comfort was included because it is a synonym for intimacy, which prior studies demonstrate how closeness and consistent personal interactions can contribute to trust (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Additionally, previous qualitative audience studies research from Antunovic et al. (2018) demonstrated how for consumers, comfort was an important component of why people chose to consume the news they do. Each factor was incorporated into a statement that asked respondents how much they perceived the various factors in relation to journalists and news outlets. A 5-point agree/disagree Likert scale was used to measure audience agreement with the statements. The statements were:

R1 Respect: I feel respected by journalists and news organizations.
R2 Listening: Journalists and news organizations listen to me.

R3 Confidence: I have confidence in journalists and news organizations.

R4 Comfort: I feel comfortable consuming information from my news outlets of choice.

R5 Commitment: Journalists and their news organizations are committed to building relationships with me.

**Relationship Indicators: Unaided.** In addition to measuring relational trust, audiences were also asked to describe their relationships with journalists in open-ended questions to gather organic data about relationship perceptions. These questions defined relationships as “connections and personal interactions with your preferred news outlets”. This definition was also based on Koliksa et al’s relational trust definition. The purpose of this question was to get a sense of what terms audiences organically use describe the quality of their relationships with news.

**Relationship Indicators: Aided.** In addition to measuring relational trust with the five factors identified previously, this was also a prime opportunity to determine additional relationship descriptors audiences associate with relational trust. Hassebrauck and Fehr (2002) tested various words to describe strong relationships between couples and identified the terms that were the most important. Relationship indicators for this study were adapted from Hassebrauck and Fehr (2002, p.256) by selecting the descriptors that were highly associated with intimacy in their study, and that were appropriate for evaluating the relationship between audience and journalist. The selected terms were:

- Empathy
- Listening


Relational Work: Openness to Relationship Building. An additional component of relational trust central to the third research question is measuring audience openness to establish greater relational trust. A series of five statements was created to determine respondents’ interest and attitudes around participating in relational trust building. These were all novel experimental questions developed after consulting the extant literature and determining the need for additional understanding of audience attitudes towards relational trust. The statements were:

Statement 1: Journalism professionals should be doing more to build respectful relationships with members of the public in general.

Statement 2: If journalists initiated more interactions with me, I would trust them more.

Statement 3: I don't personally care if journalists or news organizations want to build a relationship with me.

Statement 4: I am willing to invest considerable effort in maintaining my relationships with journalists.

Statement 5: I respect the journalists and news organizations whose news I consume.
Relational Work: Audience and Journalist Engagement. Finally, to explore RQ3, the audience’s experience of relational work in the form of audience and journalist engagement was measured. This was done by listing various types of engagement activities across the relational work spectrum taken from Koliska et al. (2023, p11; see Appendix Q17 and Q18 for a full list of activities). These activities demonstrate the broad range of relational work that journalists can conduct with audiences, from low-effort to high-effort. Koliska et al. theorizes that the higher effort relational work is associated with higher degrees of relational trust. Engagement was used as a synonym for relational work in this question since the term is relatively new. Engagement was broadly conceptualized here as having participated in any of the activities involving journalists laid out in the questionnaire, as there is little consensus as to what audience engagement with news means (Nelson, 2021). The questions were broken up into two: one relating to how frequently respondents had engaged themselves, and one relating to how frequently respondents had witnessed journalists engaging.

News Consumption. News consumption is notoriously difficult to measure in a multimedia, multiplatform media environment (Pew Research Center, 2020). Rather than attempt to capture data about news consumption frequencies across all platforms, this study opted to first obtain a general picture of how often respondents recall accessing news content within the last week. For the purposes of this analysis, a general understanding is sufficient. Frequencies were based on Pew’s research on news consumption. Categories of news usage included multiple times a day, once daily use, 3-4 times a week, 2-1 times a week, and never. From there, we asked which platforms
respondents used, leveraging Pew’s (2020) research for the news platform categories. This was done to gain a clearer picture of where news consumption was taking place.

**Pilot Study**

An initial pilot study phase was conducted to ensure the survey and the Connect platform were collecting response data properly and to determine what kind of demographic sample distributions one might expect. A sample size of 220 was selected for the pilot study, as it was hypothesized that receiving around 20% of the overall sample target would provide a large enough sample to evaluate the demographic distributions. Once the 220 respondents had completed the pilot portion, the researcher analyzed the Connect tool and backend data collection to evaluate the data quality. The initial pilot revealed that the sample was not normally distributed in terms of political party or age and skewed more democratic and younger. These variables were identified in particular because of their potential impact on trust based on the literature review. The below demographic targeting section details how the sample quotas were adjusted to ensure representation across parties and ages. Other than sample demographic quotas, the data collection for the pilot went as expected and the full sample was collected.

**Demographic Targeting**

Using the demographic targeting setting in the Connect research tool, respondent quotas for both age and party affiliation were implemented for the full launch of the study. For political party identification, the researcher consulted Gallup’s September 2023 polling of the American public to obtain a representative sample (Gallup 2023). Based on this, the target demographic breakdown of political party was identified as 24% Democrat, 46% Independents, and 28% Republicans. Quota calculations for the
remaining n=980 sample took the preexisting sample obtained from the pilot into account to ensure the overall sample was representative of party affiliation. The researcher calculated how many remaining Democrat, Independent, and Republican respondents were needed to meet the overall representative proportions. Quotas were then set for the remaining sample using these percentages to ensure the overall sample was representative of political party. The age quota was set to be census-balanced and was calculated automatically by the Connect platform. The sample obtained from the pilot was not taken into account in these calculations, due to the fact that age was a secondary consideration and thought to have less impact on trust levels compared to party affiliation. Additionally, as the quotas become more specific and include additional requirements, the rate of data collection may be slowed down. It was determined that an approximately representative age distribution was appropriate for the sample. If age, party affiliation, or any other key variables were not representative, sample weighting would be conducted to account for these differences.

**Data Quality**

Given the landscape of bots, AI, and fraudulent survey panelists, several measures were taken to ensure the data quality of the survey responses. Respondents were only allowed to take the survey once based on their unique Participant ID. The robust sample size also took into account data quality concerns - in the event that respondents had to be removed due to data quality issues such as not paying adequate attention during the survey, there would likely still be a large enough sample for analysis. This study focuses on US adults 18 and older, and the platform requires participants to be over 18, and there were settings to ensure participants were all US-based. Finally, a Captcha confirmation
was included in the survey, along with an attention check in one of the questions. Respondents could not complete the survey without passing the Captcha and if they did not pass the attention check, they were removed from the sample.

**Creating Variables for Analysis**

In order to analyze relational trust, audience engagement, and journalism engagement, three individual additive indices were created. The relational trust index combined the five relational trust statements measuring respect, listening, confidence, comfort, and commitment. The relational trust index achieves statistical reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .902), so the higher the relational index score, the higher relational trust across all five variables. The audience engagement index combined the scores of all of the engagement activities for that question. It achieved statistical reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .810), and denotes that the higher the index score the more frequently the respondent engaged in various activities. Finally, the journalism engagement index combined all of the journalist engagement activity scores for that question. This also achieved statistical reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha = .880). The higher the score, the more frequently respondents witnessed journalists engaging in various activities. All indices were analyzed as continuous variables.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to the online survey nature of this research. A limitation of these online research platforms like Connect is that younger participants are potentially more likely to have accounts and use these services compared to older individuals. This risks the sample skewing younger or more technologically inclined. Demographic quotas were implemented for the sample to partially counteract this.
Another limitation is the self-selecting nature of taking online surveys. Respondents choose whether or not they want to take the survey based on the title and description and can opt out of the survey anytime. To counteract this, the title of the survey listed for respondents was intentionally vague (“Survey: trust in news”). Finally, respondents are paid for their responses and may be motivated to complete the study quickly to gain the payment. This can impact data quality. To account for this, individuals who did not complete the entire survey (n=41) or pass the attention check (n=6) were removed from the sample for analysis.

There are also limitations in terms of the research design. Since the nature of this research is exploratory, hypothesis testing is not conducted, and therefore the findings may not conclusively answer the research questions. However, this exploratory research is a necessary step towards better understanding relational trust. The findings were not wholly US Census balanced for gender or geography and may not be generalizable to the entire US public. Additionally, findings are limited to the US in general, especially since political party plays a large role in trust in news and the US political landscape is distinct. Despite this, the large sample size means that many findings will likely be applicable to the larger populations that were sampled. Should future researchers be interested, they will also be able to compare the results of this study to results from other studies.

Finally, trust and relationships are abstract concepts and are thus difficult to measure (Engelke et al., 2019; Strömbäck et al., 2020). That is why multiple different methods for measuring trust were incorporated in this study. Since the definition of relational trust is especially novel, various factors across multiple definitions of relational trust were incorporated into the questionnaire design. Moreover, multiple methods for
measuring trust were employed in this study. All of these various forms of operationalizing trust and relationships were analyzed together as well as separately, and a holistic interpretation of the results is provided in the conclusion and discussion section. Future research should work to determine the reliability and validity of the relational trust factors used here.
CHAPTER 4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Analysis

After response collection closed, an initial data quality assurance check was conducted within the Qualtrics platform. Incomplete responses and respondents who failed the bot/attention checks were removed from the sample and excluded from the results and analysis. The study received n=1175 completed survey responses that passed all bot/attention checks. A total of n=46 responses were excluded from the analysis based on the criteria laid out in the methodology section. Data was analyzed using the StatsIQ, Crosstabs, and results section of Qualtrics along with data exports to Excel for initial review of descriptive statistics. After the initial analysis was performed, data was exported from Qualtrics to SPSS for additional inferential statistics and analysis of correlated variables based on findings of interest revealed from the initial analysis. A 95% confidence interval was used for all statistical testing. Based on prior trust studies (Brenan, 2023) it was anticipated that the distribution of trust scores would not be normally distributed, which was confirmed during initial review of the data, and therefore Spearman correlations were used in the analyses. One-way analysis of variance test were performed to determine the impact of political affiliation on trust. To analyze the qualitative responses to the two open-ended questions, simple frequency word counts were performed using R’s tidytext package. Stopwords and words from the question itself were removed prior to frequency counting, as respondents repeated the question-wording in their answers and keeping them would impact the analysis of the other organic response data. The results of these analyses are reported in the following section.
Sample Demographics

Age

The sample distribution was relatively equally spread out across age groups, aside from very young and very old. Approximately 6% of respondents were ages 18-24. Given this is a small proportion of the sample size, the 18-24 demo was combined with the 25–34-year-old demographic for a total of 28% (n=331) of the sample being between 18-34 years old. Only 1% (n=17) of the sample was 75 or older and was therefore combined with the 65-74 age range for analysis. A total of 15% (n=187) of the sample was age 65 or older. 18% (n=206) were between the ages of 35 and 44, 20% (n=231) were between the ages 45 and 54, and 20% (n=232) were between the ages 55 and 64.

Gender

Respondents were 51% female, 48% male, 1% non-binary or other gender, and <1% preferred not to say.

Political Interest

A majority 68.6% of respondents were either very interested (39.4%) or moderately interested (29.4%) in politics and current events. 25.6% were only somewhat interested and only 4.5% were not at all interested.

Political Party

Overall, 23.8% of respondents identified as Democrats, 48.6% identified as Independent including those who were independent leaning Democrat or Republican, and 27.6 % identified as Republicans. This sample almost exactly aligns with the latest October 2023 Gallup polling showing a 24% Democrat, 48% Independent, and 28% Republican voter split (Gallup, 2023). Figure 1 shows the full breakdown of respondents
across the extended seven categories of political party. For ease of analysis, political party was bucketed into 3 main categories of Democrat, Republican, and Independent.

![Figure 1. Respondent Political Party Distribution](image)

**News Consumption**

A majority 56% of respondents consumed news several times a day in the prior week, 22% consumed news once a day, 12% consumed news three or four times, 9% consumed news once or twice the prior week, and only 1% did not consume any news in the prior week. Social media was the most popular source of news content, with 65% consuming news via social media news in the past week. News websites were the second most frequent source of news content, with 60% consuming news from news websites. Broadcast and Cable TV was third with 49%.

**Trust**

A baseline measurement of trust is helpful for comparing how relational trust measurements do or do not align with general trust levels. All average trust measurements for trust are depicted in Figure 2.
**General Trust**

The mean general trust in news score was 2.6 (SD=1.0). This average indicates a slightly negative leaning overall, with a majority of respondents either having only a moderate amount of trust or little trust. Only 2.7% of respondents had “A great deal of trust” in the news in general, while 12.6% had “a lot”, 39.9% had “a moderate amount”, 31.9% had “a little”, and 12.7% had “none at all”. This study does not focus on comparing general trust levels with other previous studies using the same scale. However, future research could compare our results to other results taken using the same scale within a similar timeframe.

**Trust in Journalists**

Measurement for trust in journalists was also obtained, and the average score was 2.6 (SD=1.0). 2.8% of respondents had “A great deal of trust” in the news in general, while 14.1% had “a lot”, 39.9% had “a moderate amount”, 30.9% had “a little”, and 12.3% had “none at all”. Spearman’s rank correlation was computed to determine the relationship to general trust. There was a very strong positive and statistically significant correlation between the two $r(1159) = .949$, $p<.001$. Out of all the predictors of general trust tested using Spearman’s correlations, journalism trust was the most closely correlated, suggesting general trust and journalism trust are very highly related.

**Trust in Preferred News**

The survey asked specifically about trust in the news respondents consumed. Respondents tended to have the greatest trust in the news outlets they preferred.\(^1\) The

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\(^1\) The only other mean trust score that was equally high as preferred news was print media (Fig. 2). The other media scores were not analyzed in this study as they had fewer implications for the relational trust theory being tested.
mean score was 3.2 (SD=1.0). 8.4% had a great deal of trust, 27.3% had a lot of trust in the news outlets they consumed, 40.3% had a moderate amount, 19.6% had a little, and only 4.4% had none at all.

![Figure 2. Mean Trust Scores](image)

**Relational Trust**

Five statements were created to operationalize factors of relational trust as identified in the methods section. Each statement was measured on a 5-point Likert agreement scale for analysis. Figure 3 compares all the means for each relational trust factor, alongside the combined average score.

**R1: Respect**

The mean respect score was 2.9 (SD=1.2). Approximately 9.6% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 24.8% somewhat agreed, 31.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16.8% somewhat disagreed, and 17.5% strongly disagreed.
**R2: Listening**

The mean listening score was 2.5 (SD=1.2). Out of all five trust measures, this was the lowest mean score. 5.1% strongly agreed with the statement, 14.8% somewhat agreed, 31.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 21.6% somewhat disagreed, and 17.5% strongly disagreed. Given how one of the key takeaways from the open-ended questions was that audiences perceive a transactional relationship with journalists (see next section), a low listening score makes sense. This also lines up with prior qualitative work from Costera Meijer (2022) that emphasizes how important listening and mutual understanding are to perceiving journalism as valuable, yet audiences often feel disconnected from journalists (Peifer and Partain 2023).

**R3: Confidence**

The mean confidence score was 3.3 (SD=1.3). 15.8% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 37.4% somewhat agreed, 17.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16.6% somewhat disagreed, and 12.5% strongly disagreed.

**R4: Comfort**

The mean comfort score was 3.9 (SD=1.0), which was the highest score across all five relational trust factors. 28% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, 47.2% somewhat agreed, 13% neither agreed nor disagreed, 7.6% somewhat disagreed, and only 4.3% strongly disagreed.

**R5: Commitment**

The mean commitment score was 2.9 (SD=1.3). 9.1% of respondents strongly agreed, 26.4% somewhat agreed, 25.2% neither agreed nor disagreed, 19.2% disagreed,
and 20% strongly disagreed. The commitment score was relatively low, along with the respect score.

**Relational Trust Index**

The weighted mean score across all measures of relational trust was 3.1 (SD=1.0), which indicates a very neutral “neither agree nor disagree” sentiment overall from respondents. These findings point to audience perceptions of a more one-sided relationship with journalism, with low degrees of respect and commitment suggesting audiences feel a lack of reciprocation from journalists. However, there are significantly strong levels of comfort and confidence directed towards journalists and their news organizations.

The average relational trust index score was 15.4 (SD=5.1). As a future next step, additional statistical analysis work should be done to validate these relational trust factors. For the purposes of this study, the relational initial trust index serves as a combined representation of each of the unique theoretical components of relational trust.

![Figure 3. Comparing the Means of Relational Trust Factors](image)
All five of the relational trust statements were significantly associated with political party affiliation. Interestingly, Independents consistently had the lowest scores across all relational trust measures aside from R3: Confidence, where Republicans had the lowest score (see Table 1). A series of one-way analysis of variance tests were conducted to determine if the effect of political party was significant for relational trust measures. There was a statistically significant effect of political party for trust, especially for R3: Confidence $F(2, 1166) = 0.310, p<.001$. Table 1 shows a full breakdown of all relational trust factors by political party affiliation with ANOVA results. Overall, these findings point to Democrats maintaining a significantly higher level of relational trust when compared to Republicans and Independents. Independents were least likely to agree with many relational trust factors aside from R3 Confidence. These results also illuminate possible sentiments that might be driving the gap in news trust between Republicans and Democrats. R1: Respect and R3: Confidence for example had the largest gaps between Democrats and Republicans, differing by 0.8 and 0.9 points respectively.

**Table 1. ANOVA results of Mean Relational Trust Factor Scores by Political Party**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>R1: Respect</th>
<th>R2: Listening</th>
<th>R3: Confidence</th>
<th>R4: Comfort</th>
<th>R5: Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
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<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-Value</td>
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<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen's $f$</td>
<td><strong>0.285</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.212</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.310</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.247</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.221</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ1: How Is Relational Trust Related to Trust in News?

Relational Trust and General Trust

To determine how this operationalization of relational trust is associated with general trust, relational trust factors were compared to the other trust measures. Compared to the average relational trust score of 3.1, the mean relational trust score is higher than the mean general trust score of 2.6. The relational trust index and general trust were strongly positively correlated $r(1167) = .612$, $p < .001$. Figure 4 demonstrates the strong association between general trust and the relational trust index.

![Figure 4. General Trust Correlated with the Relational Trust Index](image)

The individual factor that was most closely associated with general trust was R3: Confidence. General trust was very strongly positively correlated with R3: Confidence
(r(1170)=.644, p<.001), which is an even stronger association than Confidence had with the relational trust index. All five individual relational factors were significantly positively correlated with general trust and had at least a medium effect size. R1: Respect was also strongly positively correlated with general trust with a large effect r(1171)=.551, p<.001. These results demonstrate that all of the individual relational factors measured were positively associated with trust, but some factors are more strongly related than others. Some factors like confidence may be a better indicator of general trust than others. Meanwhile, the relational trust index makes up for some of these differences across the factors.

**Relational Trust and Journalist Trust**

The individual factor that was most significantly related to journalism trust was also R3: Confidence r(1162)=.657, p<.001. R3: Confidence is even more strongly associated with journalism trust than it is with general trust. The relational trust index was also strongly positively correlated with Journalist trust r(1157)=.613, p<.001. Some aspects of the relational trust model like confidence may be even more applicable to predict trust in journalists compared to general trust. This would make sense, as relationships require personal interactions.
The relational trust index was highly positively correlated with trust in preferred news $r(1163)=.624$, $p<.001$. R3: Confidence was once again the most significantly positively correlated factor with trust in news consumed $r(1172)=.642$, $p<.001$.

Overall, the relational trust index was consistently strongly and positively correlated with all measures of trust. All of the factors being significantly correlated with general and specific trust measures support the theoretical claim that relational trust is a component of trust overall. R3: Confidence was also the most significantly correlated factor with each measure of trust (excluding specific media which were not tested), revealing that confidence is especially strongly associated not just with relational trust, but with trust overall. Potential confounding variables include respondents’ frequency of

**Figure 5. Journalist Trust Correlated with R3: Confidence**
consumption of news and political interest. There was a statistically significant relationship between political interest and trust measures. The more politically interested a respondent was, the more they trusted. Specific trust in the news respondents preferred had the strongest relationship. The two were positively correlated, albeit with a small effect size r(1172) = 0.285, p<.001. There was similarly a small positive correlation between political interest and the relational trust index r(1164) = 0.204, p<.001). The correlations between the relational trust factors and other trust measures were still much stronger than these potential confounding variables.

Impact of Political Party Affiliation

Democrats had the highest relational trust index score (M=18), followed by Republicans (M=14.8) and Independents (M=14.5). While political party had a significant effect on all trust measures, it had the most significant effect on trust in journalists F(2, 1158) = 0.401, p<.001. These findings demonstrate how political affiliation can impact relational trust, but the effect appears to be a larger overall pattern.

Table 2. ANOVA results of Mean Trust Scores by Political Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Trust</th>
<th>Trust in Journalists</th>
<th>Trust in News Consumed</th>
<th>Relational Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Democrat</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-Value</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen's f</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td>0.401</td>
<td>0.332</td>
<td>0.303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ2: How Are Audiences Perceiving Their Own Relationships with Journalism?

To determine how audiences conceive of their relationships to journalists and news outlets, the survey employed a series of open-ended and closed-ended questions.
They were analyzed separately and interpreted as a combined whole to get a better picture of organic perceptions as well as potentially latent perceptions of journalism.

**Unaided Relationship Indicators**

**Describing Relationships with the News Audiences Prefer.** The open-ended responses from audiences were analyzed to identify common phrases or keywords that came up organically. The frequency of words was counted for both Q12 and Q13. For Q12, respondents were asked “In one sentence, how would you describe your relationship with the news outlets you prefer?” The most common word by far used to describe respondents’ relationships to the news they consume was “trust” (n=222). It’s possible that including questions about trust earlier in the questionnaire had primed respondents to reference trust in their responses. Even so, in this context, these results point to a strong association between the concept of relationships and trust for respondents. The second-most common word was “watch” (n=141), and the fourth most common was “read” (n=90). Audiences are describing their relationship to news in terms of modes of consumption, or even transactions. The third most common word was “information” (n=92) and the fifth was “sources” (n=87). These results emphasize how the role of news in providing information is top of mind for audiences. It also aligns with how audiences perceive news as a service and provider of facts. Table 3 reports the frequencies of the top 10 words for each question. Further research could conduct sentiment analysis on these open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of audience perceptions. Overall, audiences self-described their relationships to news they consume in terms of trust, modes of consumption, and access to information.
In addition to analyzing the words with the highest frequency of mentions, additional analysis was performed to determine if the keywords from relational trust factors or from the aided relationship indicators aligned with audiences’ organic descriptions. Analysis revealed that yes, a handful of indicators were mentioned organically by audiences in addition to trust albeit at smaller frequencies. Some indicators were mentioned, and some were not mentioned at all. The top five indicator words audiences mentioned were “listening” (n=47), “honest” (n=19), “understand” (n=11), “comfortable” (n=8) and “respect” (n=5). Table 2 also includes these results. These results suggest that some relationship indicators are more salient for audiences than others.

There are alternate interpretations of these words being mentioned and this analysis does not take into account the sentence-level context of the word being mentioned. Therefore, interpretation of the results is limited to unpacking the association between the word being mentioned in the context of the question. Since the question asked about a personal relationship with the news audiences consume, one can generally assume that audiences associate these words with their relationship to the news they consume on a broad level. Further analysis is necessary to identify more specific associations.

**Describing Audiences’ Ideal Relationship with Trustworthy News.** The same approach from the prior question was used to analyze respondents’ organic descriptions of their ideal relationship with a trustworthy news source. For Q13, respondents were asked “In a few sentences, please describe what qualities characterize a strong relationship with a trustworthy news outlet in your opinion.” The top four most common
words used to describe their ideal relationship were “trust” (n=290) once again, “reporting” (n=202), “facts” (n=185), and “information” (n=159). Similar to the prior question, the function of journalism as a source of information is top of mind for audiences. The fifth most common word was “unbiased” (n=150). Table 2 provides these frequencies. These professional norms of being unbiased, factual, etc. are common in journalistic discourse among the public and scholarship alike. They are also examples of cognitive factors of trust in news that are commonly measured (Koliska et al. 2023, p.6). These results indicate that audiences conceptualize and evaluate their relationships with news outlets in terms of the service being provided and commonly articulated journalistic norms.

Table 3. Frequencies of Unaided Relationship Indicator Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>202</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Unbiased</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen/Looking</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Honest/honesty</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Commitment/commit</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand/Understanding</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Open/Openness</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Respect/respected</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aided Relationship Indicators

Eleven relationship indicators adapted from Hassebrauck and Fehr’s (2002) scale were tested to determine what words indicate a strong relationship with journalism from the consumer’s perspective. Respondents were asked to rank on a scale from 1 to 5 how
much they felt the word described a strong relationship with journalism. The average score out of 5.0 was a 4.2 (SD=0.9). This broadly indicates that on average, the set of indicator words were highly associated as good indicators of relationship quality. Figure 6 depicts the average score for each term tested. A majority of means for each term were above 4.0. Consideration (M=3.9, SD=1.0) and Empathy (M=3.8, SD=1.1) had the lowest average scores. This could be party attributed to the fact that consideration is a vague term. Empathy has a low score is an interesting result as it is one of the more intimate relationship indicators, meaning that empathy requires a large amount of closeness. Other words that required closeness and signify intimacy like respect, Understanding, Openness, Honesty, and Listening all scored above a 4.0. Honesty (M=4.7, SD=0.8), Transparency (M=4.6, SD=0.8), and Trust (M=4.5, sd=0.8) were the three highest-scoring terms. The fact that transparency and trust rank highly is not surprising given how frequently they appear in journalism discourse (Haapanen, 2020). Honesty was also a common word in the open-ended questions. The results indicate that all of these terms, perhaps aside from empathy and consideration, are applicable to describing strong relationships between the public and journalism. Future work will need to be done to validate these terms to utilize them in measuring relational trust and to theorize how they fit in the construct of relational trust. “Honest” was one of the top indicators for this question as well as the previous question, which confirms that it is a relevant characteristic of relationships from the audience’s perspective. Transparency being high-scoring also aligns with previous results that indicate respondents are using common journalistic norms to evaluate relationships with news.
RQ3: How Is Relational Work Related to Audience Perceptions of Trust in News?

Openness to Relational Work

In addition to the five relational trust factors and the open-ended questions, five additional statements were constructed to explore respondents’ openness to building relationships with journalists and news organizations. The distribution of scores for all five statements is shown in Figure 7.
Figure 7. Openness to Relational Work Mean Scores

S1: Journalism Professionals Should Be Doing More to Build Respectful Relationships with Members of the Public in General. The average score for this statement was 3.6 (SD=1.1). Along with statement 5, this was the highest scoring statement. A majority of 59.9% of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, while only 15.3% somewhat or strongly disagreed. 24.8% of respondents were neutral and neither agreed nor disagreed. Interestingly, as Figure 8 shows, Republicans were much more likely to agree both somewhat and strongly (70.9%) with this compared to both Democrats (58.6% of Democrats) and Independents (54.3% of Independents).
S2: If Journalists Initiated More Interactions with Me, I Would Trust Them

More. The average score for this statement was 2.9 (SD = 1.2). Only 31.2% of respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed, while 37% somewhat or strongly disagreed. 31.9% did not agree or disagree. In the perceptions of audiences, relational trust is not as simple as more interactions equating to more trust. Independents were more likely to disagree (42.1%) that “If journalists initiated more interactions with me, I would trust them more” compared to 27.3% of Democrats and 35.1% of Republicans. These results suggest that Independents are potentially less receptive to relational work.

S3: I Don't Personally Care if Journalists or News Organizations Want to Build a Relationship with Me. The average score for this statement was 3.5 (SD=1.2). A majority 55% of respondents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed, while only 23% somewhat or strongly disagreed. 22% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. As apathy increases, relational trust decreases. These results, combined with the following statement, show that interest and commitment on the part of consumers are components
of relational trust. These factors are also important coming from journalists as well, as indicated in the following results section on journalist engagement.

**S4: I Am Willing to Invest Considerable Effort in Maintaining My Relationships with Journalists.** The average score for this statement was 2.6 (SD=1.2), making it the lowest-scoring statement across all five. Only 25.2% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed, while almost a majority of respondents, 49.7%, somewhat or strongly disagreed. 25.2% were neutral. This statement was strongly positively correlated with the relational trust index ($r(1166)=.612, p<.001$), suggesting that the more willingness one has to invest effort, the more relational trust one likely has as well. Future studies should work to determine if willingness to invest time begets relational trust, vice versa, or both.

**S5: I Respect the Journalists and News Organizations Whose News I Consume.** Along with statement 1, this statement had the highest mean with a score of 3.6 (SD=1.2). This statement also had the highest number of respondents agree, with 64.7% either somewhat or strongly agreeing. Only 15.6% of respondents somewhat or strongly disagreed, and 19.7% were neutral. This is interesting considering respondents did not feel as highly respected by journalists themselves (R1: Respect M=2.9) and suggests audiences perceive a lack of reciprocated respect.

**Experiences with Relational Work**

In order to explore the relationship between specific engagement activities and relational trust, engagement was measured from both the audience's and journalists’ sides. For easier analysis, the answer scale was recoded so that “never” was equal to 1,
“once/twice” was equal to two, and “three or more times” was equal to 3. A higher score means more frequent engagement.

**Audience Engagement with Journalism.** For audiences, the most common activities with the highest scores in order were liking or sharing an article on social media ($M=2.32$, $SD=0.87$), commenting on an article ($M=2.1$, $SD=0.90$), investigating sources or reporter background ($M=1.91$, $SD=.90$) and following a journalist on social media ($M=1.85$, $SD=.90$). All other activities had a mean below 1.5, meaning on average a majority of respondents had never engaged in the other 8 activities. Figure 9 shows the mean frequencies of all audience engagement activities measured.

![Figure 9. Mean Audience Engagement Scores](image-url)
Audience Engagement Index. The average audience engagement index score was 18.4 (SD=4.8). The audience engagement index was significantly positively correlated with the relational trust index, albeit with a small effect size $r(1145)=.266$, $p<.001$. As Figure 10 shows, general trust was still positively correlated with the audience engagement index but had a small effect size $r(1145)=.152$, $p<.001$. Although consumption, relational trust, and general trust are all positively associated with audience engagement, the relationship does not appear to be strong. This suggests that while audience engagement may factor into evaluations of trust, it does not tell the full story.

![Diagram showing the correlation between Audience Engagement Index and General Trust](chart.png)

**Figure 10. Audience Engagement Index Correlated with General Trust**

Journalist Engagement. A similar exercise was conducted with journalist engagement, and results showed that audiences witnessed journalistic engagement to a higher degree than engaging themselves. The most frequently reported form of journalistic engagement was posting on social media ($M=2.5$, $SD=.8$), with the second highest being reporting in the field ($M=2.4$, $SD=.8$) and interviewing someone was third
(M=2.35, SD=.86). Issuing corrections, responding to comments, providing transparency, and living in the community all had means above 2 as well (see Figure 11 for all mean values.). None of the activities had a mean below 1.5, meaning a majority of respondents had witnessed journalists conducting all of the activities at least once.

![Figure 11. Mean Journalist Engagement Scores](image)

**Relational Trust and Journalist Engagement Index.** The average journalism engagement index score was 24.3 (SD= 6.8). Both journalism and audience engagement were significantly positively correlated and had a medium, approaching large effect size r(1119)=.498, p<.001. The more a respondent engaged, the more they reported
journalists' engagement. As figure 12 shows, the relational trust index had the strongest positive correlation with journalist engagement among all of the measures of trust $r(1134) = .245$, $p<.001$, although to small effect. These findings suggest that Journalist engagement likely contributes to relational trust, although it is not the only factor at play.

Figure 12. Journalism Engagement Index Correlated with Relational Trust Index

Interestingly, engagement with journalists and witnessing journalism engagement were not strongly significantly correlated with the various measures of trust. This could be due to several factors. A majority of respondents were not highly engaged with journalists personally. A low level of engagement in terms of frequency could mean that there is not enough information to determine whether a relationship exists. The most common forms of engagement tended to be social-media-based interactions. As theorized by Koliska et al. (2023), low-effort engagement may only yield transactional connections that don’t contribute meaningfully to trust. Future research could work to distinguish between these various efforts of engagement and determine another measurement schema.
to account for low versus high effort engagement and its impact on an overall engagement score. While engagement and interactions with journalists don’t necessarily explain relational trust, there is still a significant relationship, meaning that relational work is a likely a component of trust.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Relational Trust as a Component of General Trust

The significant correlations between relational trust indicators and general trust provides strong evidence that relational trust is a component of general trust. Each individual relational trust factor also appears to play a role in overall perceptions of relational trust. While claims of causation are difficult to make, the association between relational trust and general trust supports the model of relational trust Koliska et al. (2023) propose. It is also possible that more positive perceptions of general trust can lead one to evaluate relationships more positively, and to some extent this is likely true. However, for the purposes of understanding how trust can be improved, acknowledging the influence of relational factors is a step in the right direction.

Current Perceptions Audience-Journalist Relationships

Across both open-ended questions respondents indicated a service-oriented, transactional, and often one-sided relationship with news providers. Audiences primarily described their relationships with journalists in terms of accessing information and their various modes of news consumption. This highlights the audience perception of providing information as the primary function of journalism, which is a commonly held understanding of journalism espoused in uses and gratifications theory (Lee and Chyi 2014). Fischer (2018) also argues that journalists and journalism scholars share the belief that the primary goal of audience news consumption is to stay informed. The results in this study corroborate the notion that audiences and journalists alike are viewing their relationships through a narrative lens of one-way transactions focused on providing information as a service.
The belief that the primary function of news is information also trickles down to the concept of trust in news. Trust in news is frequently evaluated based on how much audiences perceive the information provided to be accurate, unbiased, balanced, etc. (Koliska et al., 2023). This same discourse appears to frame how audiences understand the concept of relational trust as well. When asked about their ideal relationship with trustworthy news sources, audiences again emphasized facts, information, and reporting. For audiences, having a good trusting relationship means they believe the source provides accurate information.

Despite the discourse around news as providing information, and assessing trustworthiness based on perceptions of being unbiased, other research has shown that audience assessments of trust are made heuristically rather than solely cognitively (Kümpel and Unkel, 2020). Metzger et al. (2020) have also shown that political affiliation influences how people evaluate the same set of facts differently, and that audiences judge attitude-consistent and neutral sources as more credible than dissonant ones. It is therefore necessary to dig deeper to explore the factors influencing these heuristic assessments. This paper proposes that relationships are an underlying part of this heuristic assessment, and the results help us understand how relationships are related to audience trust.

**Relational Trust in Action**

The relatively strong score of the five relational trust indicators implies that as measured, respondents are experiencing a certain level of relational trust in journalism already. Despite the emphasis on information and consumption, respondents also invoked trust when describing their relationships with the outlets they consume. These results
support the claim that audiences do perceive an association between trust and relationships with the news they consume. They also resonated with the specific relational work statements. Even though they did not organically describe relational trust as defined in this paper, the evidence supports an underlying sentiment of relational trust.

People evaluate and describe journalism based on the professional norms journalistic discourse espouses. If building relationships is not a part of the typical journalistic norms, then consumers may not have relationships as top of mind when they think about their interactions with news. Despite not being top of mind, honesty was a common quality mentioned organically by respondents, and confidence was the highest-scoring relational trust factor. It is likely that these relationship qualities are an implied, latent part of trust.

**Recommendations**

Based on the results, this research argues that relationships between audiences and journalists/news organizations are a unique and important component of trust in news. As such, improving relationship quality theoretically could lead to healthier perceptions of trust in news. Even then, respondents are interested in journalists building relationships in and of themselves. Currently, consumption appears to be the most common interaction and the basis for most audience relationships with news. As Fink (2019) suggested, journalists having conversations with people they don’t normally interact with could be one way forward. And people value when journalists take the effort to engage and connect with them (Costera Meijer, 2022), which is more akin to friendship than the one-way transactions they are used to.
However, not all interactions or forms of engagement are created equal. While there was a positive correlation between engaging with journalists and relational trust, the relationship was not strong. Therefore, it may be important for future research to distinguish between high-quality and low-quality engagement and determine what types of interactions are more strongly associated with relationship-building. There was also evidence that both witnessing and personally experiencing interactions with journalists were similarly correlated with relational trust, meaning both could potentially impact relational trust. This is good news for journalists, as the impacts of these interactions on relational trust may not be exclusive to the individuals interacting. Witnessing an interaction may also yield positive outcomes for relational trust. The evidence from this study supports the notion that journalists acting within a network of community members could create a larger impact in terms of fostering relational trust (Wenzel, 2020; Skippage, 2020).

Apart from introducing additional relational engagement opportunities, journalists and researchers should also understand the importance of incorporating relationship-building into journalistic norms. This would require shifting focus to value relationships in both actions and words, as this study demonstrates how discourse is important and shapes audience perceptions. Conducting further research on relational trust and even adapting the measurement schemas from this research could enable a better understanding of how relational trust operates, and what engagement activities are most effective. A first next step would be to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis with the relational trust factors from this paper to further define the relational trust construct.
Implications and Conclusion

Relational trust provides practitioners, researchers, and audiences an opportunity to shed light on a component of journalism that for the most part has gone unrecognized in the literature and everyday life. The data support the notion that perceiving good quality relationships with journalists is associated with trust. There is also strong evidence that even people with lower levels of general trust, like Republicans, would be receptive to these kinds of interactions. In fact, the evidence suggests that they are significantly more likely to believe more should be done in terms of relationship building. This requires a certain level of openness and effort from both parties, and there are likely limitations to what relationship-building can accomplish without compromising journalistic values. In her discussion on community-centered journalism, Wenzel (2020) discusses how trust relationship building and journalism may hit snags when journalists work with groups that have an agenda beyond information gathering/supplying etc. due to the emphasis on objectivity in reporting (Wenzel, p.65 2020). In these cases, there is a tension between the narrative of objectivity and close relationships with individuals and groups (even though there has been a push away from centering objectivity; see Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Incorporating relational trust into the everyday news landscape requires reorienting journalistic norms and adding another facet to the narrative lens. But if the institution of journalism is able to provide concerted efforts to build meaningful connections with audiences, there will likely be consumers ready and willing to receive them.
APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1. In the past week, how often did you consume news or current events content?
Several times a day
Once a day
Three or four times
Once or twice
Never

Q2. In the past week, which of the following types of media did you use to keep up with news and current events? Please select all that apply.
Broadcast/Cable TV (e.g. CNN, Fox, PBS, ABC, etc.)
Streaming TV or livestreams (e.g. via Hulu, Sling TV, NBC News Now, etc.)
Radio
Print newspapers or magazines
Podcasts
News websites
Social media (e.g. Youtube, TikTok, Facebook, etc.)
Email newsletters
Apps on a Smartphone or Tablet (e.g. Apple News, BBC News app, etc.)
Other (please specify)
N/A - I didn't consume news last week

Q3. In the past week, which outlets did you go to for news and current events content?
Fox News
CNN
NBC
MSNBC
PBS
BBC
NPR
ABC News
CBS News
USA Today
The Wall Street Journal
The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Guardian
Politico
Newsmax
OAN
Local news/radio
Other (please specify)
None of these
Q4. How much trust do you have in the news in general?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

Q5. How much trust do you have in journalists in general?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

Q6. How much trust do you have in the news from your preferred news organizations?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

IF Q2 media type = social media
Q7. How much trust do you have in the news on social media?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

IF Q2 media type = radio
Q8. How much trust do you have in the news on the radio?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

IF Q2 media type = news websites
Q9. How much trust do you have in the news on news websites?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal
IF Q2 media type = broadcast/cable TV

Q10. How much trust do you have in the news on television?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

IF Q2 media type = print

Q11. How much trust do you have in the news in print newspapers or magazines?
None at all
A little
A moderate amount
A lot
A great deal

Q12. In one sentence, how would you describe your relationship with the news outlets you prefer?
By relationship, we mean your connections and personal interactions with your preferred news outlets.
(Open-ended)

Q13. In a few sentences, please describe what qualities characterize a strong relationship with a trustworthy news outlet in your opinion.
(Open-ended)

Q14. Please rate how much you agree with the following statements about your personal relationship with the news outlets you prefer.
Horizontal Scale:
Strongly disagree (1)
Somewhat disagree (2)
Neither agree nor disagree (3)
Somewhat agree (4)
Strongly agree (5)

Vertical Statements:
I feel respected by journalists and news organizations.
Journalists and news organizations listen to me.
I have confidence in journalists and news organizations.
I feel comfortable consuming information from my news outlets of choice.
Journalists and their news organizations are committed to building relationships with me.
Q15. Please rate how much you agree with the following statements.
Horizontal Scale:
Strongly disagree (1)
Somewhat disagree (2)
Neither agree nor disagree (3)
Somewhat agree (4)
Strongly agree (5)
Vertical Statements:
Journalism professionals should be doing more to build respectful relationships with members of the public in general.
If journalists initiated more interactions with me, I would trust them more.
I don't personally care if journalists or news organizations want to build a relationship with me.
I am willing to invest considerable effort in maintaining my relationships with journalists.
I respect the journalists and news organizations whose news I consume.

Q16. On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate each of the below characteristics as to whether or not you think it is a good indicator of the quality of a relationship with journalists/news organizations.
Horizontal Scale:
1 (Not a good indicator of relationship quality)
2
3
4
5 (Is a good indicator of relationship quality)
Vertical Statements:
Empathy
Listening
Trust
Mutual respect
Honesty
Understanding
Openness
Consideration
Confidence
Commitment
Transparency
For quality control purposes, please select "5"
Q17. How many times have you engaged in the following activities?
Horizontal Scale:
Never
Once
Two or more
Vertical Statements:
Followed a journalist on social media
Liked or shared a news article on social media
Donated to a news organization
Submitted a question to a news organization
Met a journalist who lives in your community
Participated in an interview for a news story
Attended an event/talk hosted by a journalist or news organization
Commented on an article
Investigated the sources and/or background of a reporter
Provided content for a news story (e.g. submitted a photo or video)
Conducted feedback/debrief conversations with reporters
Collaborated or co-produced a news story with a journalist

Q18. How many times have you ever personally seen a journalism professional engage in the following activities?
Horizontal Scale:
Never
Once
Two or more
Vertical Statements:
Posting on social media
Issuing corrections to a story
Providing transparency about themselves (bios, contact info) or news organizations (about pages)
Providing transparency about the news production and decision-making process
Reporting in the field
Responding to comments on social media or below articles
Interviewing someone for a news story
Offering educational opportunities (talks in schools, media literacy training, etc.)
Seeking personal conversations or providing personal explanations for individual members of the public (emails, phone calls, etc.)
Organizing social events (opening newsrooms to the public, public talks, etc.)
Living in the community they are covering
Collaborating or co-producing stories with the public
Q19. How interested are you in politics and current events?
Not at all interested
Somewhat interested
Moderately interested
Very interested

Q20. What is your age range?
Under 18
18 - 24
25 - 34
35 - 44
45 - 54
55 - 64
65 - 74
75 - 84
85 or older

Q21. What best describes your gender?
Male
Female
Non-binary / third gender
Prefer not to say

Q22. What is the highest level of education you completed?
Less than high school
High school graduate
Some college
2 year degree
4 year degree
Professional degree
Doctorate

Q23. What is your race/ethnicity? Please select all that apply.
White
Black or African American
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
Hispanic
Other

Q24. How would you describe the area where you currently live?
Urban
Rural
Suburban
Q25. What is your total household income?
Less than $10,000
$10,000 - $19,999
$20,000 - $29,999
$30,000 - $39,999
$40,000 - $49,999
$50,000 - $59,999
$60,000 - $69,999
$70,000 - $79,999
$80,000 - $89,999
$90,000 - $99,999
$100,000 - $149,999
More than $150,000

Q26. What best describes your party affiliation?
Strong Democrat
Democrat
Independent leaning Democrat
Independent
Independent leaning Republican
Republican
Strong Republican

Q27. Overall, how would you describe your personal political outlook?
Very liberal
Liberal
Somewhat liberal
Moderate, middle of the road
Somewhat conservative
Conservative
Very conservative
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