This is a preprint of an article accepted for publication in *The Electronic Library*: Choi, W. & Lee, H.S. Perceived importance and predictive power: Key criteria for judging information credibility on social Q&A platforms. *The Electronic Library*. https://doi.org/10.1108/EL-05-2025-0188

Perceived Importance and Predictive Power: Key Criteria for Judging Information Credibility on Social Q&A Platforms

Abstract

Purpose. This study investigated how users assess the credibility of information on social question-and-answer (Q&A) platforms. The study builds on a social Q&A-specific web credibility framework (Choi *et al.*, 2023), integrating a two-dimensional model of credibility—trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland *et al.*, 1953)—and three types of web credibility cues and heuristics—author or community, content, and design (Fogg, 2003).

Methodology. Using online survey data from 598 users, we employed exploratory factor analysis to identify 10 credibility criteria across three categories: author or community, content, and design. One-sample *t*-tests assessed the perceived importance of these criteria, and multiple regression analyses examined their associations with two core credibility dimensions—trustworthiness and expertise—while controlling for user characteristics.

Findings. Although the identified criteria were rated highly overall in conceptual importance (M = 3.92), only six—community reputation, appropriate design, moderation, engaging design, reference reliability, and decency—were significantly associated with perceived trustworthiness, expertise, or both. In contrast, traditionally valued criteria related to answer quality or author characteristics had limited predictive power. These findings support a refined, empirically grounded eight-criterion framework for credibility in social Q&A environments.

Originality. This study offers a data-driven update to a 21-criterion credibility model, identifying the most influential criteria in terms of conceptual importance and applicability in evaluating the trustworthiness and expertise of information on peer-based, collaborative platforms. Also, it suggests potential to extend the framework to emerging environments such as generative artificial intelligence, where criteria like reference reliability remain relevant.

Keywords: information credibility, web credibility, social media, social question-and-answer, social Q&A

1. Introduction

Social question-and-answer (Q&A) platforms, such as Quora, Stack Exchange, and Reddit's Ask communities, have emerged as important online venues for everyday information seeking (Oh, 2018; Shah *et al.*, 2009). These platforms enable users to pose questions and receive responses from diverse contributors, leveraging the power of collective intelligence (Zhang *et al.*, 2019). Unlike traditional web resources operated by individual users or organizations, social Q&A sites rely on peer-generated content, with information quality shaped through participation, voting, commentary, and community norms (Shah *et al.*, 2009).

Anonymity on social Q&A platforms can foster open dialogue and protect privacy, contributing to more active knowledge building (Guo and Caine, 2021; Kayes *et al.*, 2015). However, options to make user profiles publicly unavailable or use pseudonyms to obscure the identity, credentials, or intentions of contributors may lead to lower information quality (Huang *et al.*, 2023). For information seekers, the challenge of accessing accurate author information is becoming more pronounced with the integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Users' information evaluation on peer-knowledge platforms is becoming more complex and uncertain. The anonymous nature of information can undermine traditional credibility cues, prompting users to rely more on surface-level cues and heuristics or socially constructed indicators (e.g., ratings) that may not reflect information quality.

Credibility assessment of web-based resources, or web credibility assessment, can be defined as an indirect evaluation of information based on web elements signaling trustworthiness and expertise (Choi and Stvilia, 2015). Thus, web credibility assessment is inherently perception-based and dynamic (Danielson, 2006; Rieh, 2017). Users' evaluations can vary depending on genre (e.g., encyclopedia, microblog), contextual platform features (e.g., design, functionality), and sociocultural dynamics of the user community. For example, Wikipedia's "No original research" policy prohibits using information or knowledge not published by a reliable source. That policy may not work for a news platform. Thus, general web credibility frameworks, although useful, can be too broad when applied to specific platforms, such as social Q&A platforms.

Although previous studies of credibility evaluation regarding social Q&A platforms offered valuable insights into how users interacted with particular features or heuristics, their findings are often fragmented and difficult to generalize unless interpreted in a theoretical framework. To bridge this gap, intermediary "middleware" is needed—a genre-specific framework that connects empirical platform findings with established web credibility theory. This would enable the translation of conceptual criteria into operational models tailored to specific digital environments. Choi et al. (2023) addressed this need

by proposing a social Q&A-specific credibility framework that synthesized prior frameworks based on a case study of two leading platforms—Stack Exchange and Wikipedia Reference Desk. Their framework identifies various credibility criteria alongside examples of cues and heuristics in three conceptual categories **(Fogg, 2003)**—author or community, content, and design—and maps them to two key underlying dimensions of credibility **(Hovland *et al.*, 1953)**—trustworthiness and expertise. Although this framework provides a solid foundation for understanding credibility in peer-based environments, it remains conceptual.

Building on this foundation, the present study tested and refined the framework using user survey data. By grounding these conceptual constructs in empirical user perceptions and behaviors, this study advances a theoretically informed and empirically validated model of information credibility in social Q&A contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Criteria for Judging Information Credibility on Social Q&A Sites

As peer-knowledge production platforms, social Q&A sites are centered on collaborative content generation, where content emerges through collective efforts to provide answers, advice, or suggestions in response to questions asked (Oh, 2018; Zhu and Chen, 2015). Previous research has examined how author-related factors contribute to users' assessments of information quality and credibility. Commonly identified author-related factors include reputation, expertise, author profile, and attitude (Han *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Osatuyi *et al.*, 2022; Savolainen, 2023). For example, Savolainen (2023) emphasized the importance of the author's reputation, expertise, and honesty in users' perceptions of information credibility on Reddit. Also, Lee et al. (2019) found that users perceived a polite attitude as an indicator of information credibility on Stack Exchange.

Answer or content-related factors also play a central role in credibility evaluations on social Q&A sites. Diverse judgment criteria have been identified in relation to content, such as accuracy, clarity, completeness, detail, fact, length, logic, novelty, grammar, writing tone, and topicality when evaluating answers' credibility on social Q&A sites (Amancio *et al.*, 2021; Fu and Oh, 2019; Kim, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2021; Osatuyi *et al.*, 2022). Apart from traditional cues focusing on individual traits, some studies have highlighted the influence of community-based indicators, such as likes or votes, on credibility perceptions (Amancio *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2025).

Design-related factors, such as interface, interaction, or navigation, have also been shown to influence credibility judgements in online environments (Chang *et al.*, 2021; Sun *et al.*, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2020). Considering the open and collaborative nature of social Q&A platforms, allowing anyone to post

their thoughts and opinions, the importance of moderation was emphasized, noting its role in maintaining content quality and fostering perceptions of the communities as credible sources for online information seeking (Annamoradnejad *et al.*, 2022; Choi *et al.*, 2023; Koranteng *et al.*, 2021).

2.2 User Characteristics Influencing Credibility Judgments

Previous research has highlighted user characteristics as influencing judgment of web information credibility, such as involvement in an evaluation task, subject-matter competence, attitudes toward information seeking and processing, and information technology proficiency (Choi and Stvilia, 2015). **Theoretical models of dual information processing, such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic–systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), have been widely used to inform research on how users make credibility judgments based on their motivation and ability (Choi *et al.*, 2025; Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Metzger, 2007). For instance, Metzger's (2007) dual-processing model of online credibility suggests that users with high motivation and ability engage in central (systematic) processing, critically evaluating content for accuracy, completeness, and relevance. In contrast, users with low motivation, ability, or both, tend to rely on peripheral (heuristic) cues, such as author identity or design aesthetics.**

Demographic factors (e.g., age, sex, and education level), users' experience with web conventions (e.g., web addresses, hyperlinks) and familiarity with web platforms (e.g., social networking sites, wiki pages), and **topic domain (e.g., health, politics, sports)** can influence web credibility assessments (Choi, 2020; Fogg *et al.*, 2001; Guess *et al.*, 2020; **Hirvonen *et al.*, 2025**; Lucassen *et al.*, 2013; Rampersad and Althiyabi, 2020; Van Der Sluis *et al,* 2023; Vu and Chen, 2024). For instance, **Vu and Chen (2024), using an experimental design based on the heuristic-systematic model, demonstrated that individuals with high social media efficacy are significantly better at detecting fake health news. These users tend to engage in more analytic thinking, relying on evidence quality while discounting superficial cues, such as message length or popularity metrics. Additionally, age, alongside political ideology, consistently predicted credibility judgments and sharing behavior: younger and more liberal participants were less likely to perceive the fake health news article as credible, intend to follow its recommendations, or share its content.**

3. Theoretical Background

Choi et al.'s (2023) social Q&A framework of web credibility assessment includes 21 social Q&A-relevant criteria for credibility assessment and categorizes them into three groups of web elements based on Fogg's (2003) web credibility framework: social Q&A author or community characteristics (n = 5; e.g., decency, credentials); content attributes (n = 12; e.g., unbiasedness, structural accuracy,

novelty); and site design (*n* = 4; e.g., moderation, ease of use). Cues and heuristics associated with these criteria have been identified: author-related factors, such as reputation scores or badges, profile availability, and history of answers on a topic; content credibility factors, such as citations, vote scores, and answer recency; and design credibility factors, such as page layout and aesthetic appearance.

The framework (Choi *et al.*, 2023) **adopts Hovland et al.'s (1953) two-dimensional model of credibility—trustworthiness and expertise—to define information credibility in social Q&A contexts. This conceptualization aligns with widely accepted definitions across disciplines, including library and information science (Rieh, 2017) and human–computer interaction (Danielson, 2006).** The framework maps each criterion to either trustworthiness or expertise (Hovland *et al.*, 1953)—positing that each criterion has a more direct effect on one credibility dimension. Trustworthiness in the social Q&A context refers to the user's perception of an answer or other information objects on the sites (e.g., replies) as being free from bias and absent from deceptive intentions, whereas expertise refers to the user's perception of an answer as in-depth and insightful. For example, decency, an author attribute reflecting a serious and polite attitude (e.g., answer tone), is considered to affect perceived trustworthiness. Credentials, another author attribute reflecting topical training and experience, is viewed as associated more with expertise (Choi *et al.*, 2023). The conceptual cross-mapping of the three web credibility marker categories and two underlying credibility dimensions yields a typology with six social Q&A-specific credibility types (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Social Q&A Web Credibility Assessment Framework (Choi et al., 2023)

Two Underlying Dimensions of Credibility

Three types of web credibility	**Trustworthiness**	**Expertise**
Author	• Decency • Benevolence • Transparency	• Reputation • Credentials
Content	• Citing sources • Currency • Social validation • Unbiasedness • Consistency	• Evidence-based • Pertinence • Reinforcement • Structured accuracy • Semantic accuracy • Semantic completeness • Novelty
Design	• Engaging design • Moderation	• Appropriate design • Ease of use

The social Q&A framework for web credibility (Choi *et al.*, 2023) helps identify various cues and heuristics associated with credibility criteria and their potential effects on underlying credibility dimensions. However, considering that these criteria and their relationships with credibility dimensions are conceptual—based on a synthesis of theoretical frameworks and a document analysis—it is important to validate them using empirical user data. Also, various user characteristics identified as influential in the literature need to be considered in validating these relationships. Therefore, the present study addressed two research questions: What criteria do users consider important when assessing the credibility of information on social Q&A sites? How do these credibility criteria relate to the two dimensions of information credibility—trustworthiness and expertise—regarding social Q&A sites?

4. Method

4.1 Questionnaire Development

To address our research questions, we developed a questionnaire informed by prior literature (Choi *et al.*, 2022; Fogg *et al.,* 2001). Rather than evaluating researcher-selected sample content, participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences using social Q&A sites. To ensure conceptual clarity, we provided a definition of social Q&A sites at the beginning of the survey: Social Q&A sites refer to a type of social media that allows users to "ask and answer questions, evaluate content submitted by others, and view the community's aggregate assessment of which questions, answers, and users are best" (Gazan, 2011, p. 2302). Participants then listed the Q&A sites they had used, ensuring their responses were grounded in real-world platform use. The questionnaire was pretested with seven doctoral students and three faculty members.

4.2 Measurements

4.2.1 Importance of Credibility Markers on Social Q&A Sites

Guided by the social Q&A credibility framework (Choi *et al.*, 2023), we developed 39 items regarding the importance of credibility cues and heuristics related to author and community, content, and design on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*). Internal consistencies (Cronbach's alpha) were acceptable to good (author or community: .71, content: .83, design: .82).

4.2.2 Perceptions of Information Credibility

We included two items to assess two aspects of how participants perceived information credibility: trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland *et al.*, 1953). Specifically, respondents rated their level of agreement with two statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*): "I will find the information posted on the site (e.g., answers) to be trustworthy" and "I will find

the information posted on the site (e.g., answers) to have expertise." Each response was analyzed separately, treating trustworthiness and expertise as independent indicators of how users evaluated the credibility of information on social Q&A sites.

4.2.3 User Characteristics

Two items captured internet experience: "On average, how many hours a day do you use the internet?" (1 = *less than 5 hours*, 2 = *5 hours or more but less than 10 hours*, 3 = *10 hours or more*) and "How long have you been using the internet?" (1 = *less than 5 years* and 2 = *5 years or more*).

We assessed participants' experience with social Q&A platforms through two questions: "How often do you use social Q&A sites?" (1 = *daily*, 2 = *weekly*, 3 = *monthly or less often than monthly*) and "How long have you been using social Q&A sites?" (1 = *less than 1 year*, 2 = *between 1 and 5 years*, 3 = *5 years or more*).

Given the potential influence of topic on credibility judgments (Hirvonen *et al.*, 2025; Van der Sluis *et al.*, 2023), participants were asked to select and rank the topics they most frequently searched on social Q&A sites (e.g., technology, science, health, finance, government, entertainment). The top-ranked topic was treated as their primary domain of interest.

Demographic variables included age (18–29 years, 30–49 years, 50 years or older, and prefer not to answer), gender (female, male, and others), and education (high school or less, some college or associate or undergraduate degree, and a graduate or professional degree).

4.3 Data Collection

A self-administered Qualtrics-based questionnaire was distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform allowing researchers to recruit motivated participants. For this study, participants needed to: (a) be 18 years or older, (b) be living in the United States, and (c) have used a social Q&A site in the prior 6 months. This study was reviewed and approved by [Institution name omitted for review purpose]'s Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol #), and all participants provided informed consent before participating.

4.4 Data Analysis

Of 881 responses recorded, 598 were retained for analysis after removing incomplete data. The data analysis involved four phases. First, we conducted descriptive statistics to analyze participants' demographic backgrounds, **frequently searched topics, and** internet experiences, including social Q&A sites.

Second, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted for each web credibility marker category to identify factors representing meaningful yet distinct characteristics, aligning with theoretical

and empirical research (Choi *et al.*, 2023; Fogg, 2003). To validate the suitability of the data for EFA, Bartlett's test of sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was applied to confirm that the correlation matrix was not random; the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (Kaiser, 1974) had to exceed .50. **Parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) was used to determine the number of factors to retain by comparing eigenvalues from the actual dataset with those from randomly generated datasets of the same size. Only factors whose eigenvalues exceeded their random counterparts were retained. This technique is considered one of the most robust for factor retention, as it accounts for sampling error and identifies factors that explain more variance than expected by chance (Hayton et al., 2004).**

We used iterated principal axis for extraction because of its relative tolerance for nonnormality and demonstrated ability to recover weak factors (Briggs and MacCallum, 2003). Identified factors were interpreted after applying the promax method, an oblique rotation allowing correlated factors, which is expected in social sciences, such as people's perceptions of information credibility (Thompson, 2004; Watkins, 2018). Items were excluded from further analysis if they had a community (h^2) less than .40 or pattern coefficients (λ) less than .32, which were considered weak (Costello and Osborne, 2005; Watkins, 2018). Complex loadings with pattern coefficients exceeding .32 for more than one factor were rejected to honor simple structure (Costello and Osborne, 2005; Watkins, 2018).

Third, one-sample *t*-tests were performed on composite factors identified by EFA to determine whether their mean importance ratings were statistically significantly different from the overall mean.

Fourth, we conducted multiple regressions to determine how these factors, as independent variables, contributed to the dependent variables—trustworthiness and expertise—after controlling user characteristics. All statistical analyses were done using R (version 4.2.2).

5. Results

5.1 Characteristics of Study Sample

Of 589 participants, 57.7% (*n* = 345) were male. Most participants were White (*n* = 498, 82.5%), followed by Black or African American (*n* = 42, 7%), Asian (*n* = 30, 5%), multiracial (*n* = 28, 4.7%), and other (*n* = 3, 0.5%), with two (0.3%) preferring not to disclose their race. About 66.6% (*n* = 92) held a bachelor's degree or higher.

Regarding social Q&A use, Reddit was the most frequently used (*n* = 460, 29.5%), followed by Quora (*n* = 367, 23.6%), Yahoo! Answers (*n* = 238, 15.3%), Answers.com (*n* = 174, 11.2%), Stack Exchange (*n* = 153, 9.8%) and Wikipedia Reference Desk (*n* = 151, 9.7%). About 65% (*n* = 388) of participants reported using social Q&A sites for 5 years or more; 30.4% (*n* = 262) reported more than 1 year but less than 5 years, and 20.4% (*n* = 122) reported less than 1 year. Regarding frequency of using social Q&A

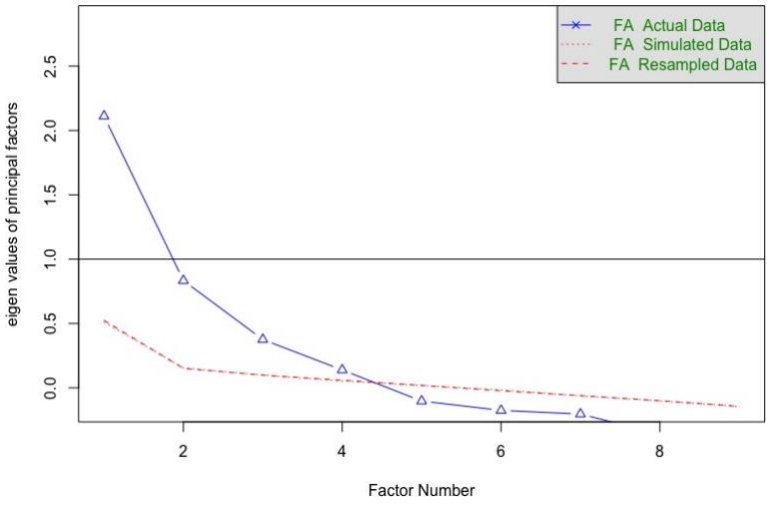
sites, 32.3% (*n* = 193) reported daily use, 43.8% (*n* = 262) reported weekly use, and 23.9% (*n* = 143) reported monthly use or less. Technology-related information was most frequently sought (*n* = 158, 26.4%), followed by health and sciences (*n* = 152, 25.4%); entertainment, arts, and travel (*n* = 113, 18.9%); business and finance (*n* = 86, 14.4); and government and politics (*n* = 46, 7.7%).

5.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

5.2.1 Author and Community

Bartlett's (1954) test of sphericity confirmed that the correlation matrix was not random, $\chi^2(55) = 1{,}655.72$, $p < .001$. Also, KMO was .79, exceeding the .05 threshold required for EFA (Kaiser, 1974). Of 11 items related to author or community characteristics, three items with weak communality or pattern coefficients were removed (Costello and Osborne, 2005). **A parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) on the remaining eight items supported a four-factor solution (Figure 2).**

Figure 2. Parallel Analysis on Author- and Community-related Items



Using principal axis factoring with promax rotation, four factors were identified, accounting for 53% of the total variance (Table 1): (a) transparency (availability of author information; α = .75); (b) engaged authority (author knowledge, experience, and willingness to provide high-quality answer; α = .65); (c) decency (politeness; α = .73); and (d) community reputation (source reliability; α = .60).

Table 1. EFA on Author and Community Items (*N* = 598)

Item	*M*	*SD*	F1	F2	F3	F4	h^2
"Discloses information about themselves to other users"	2.99	1.25	**.78**	-.04	.00	.05	.62

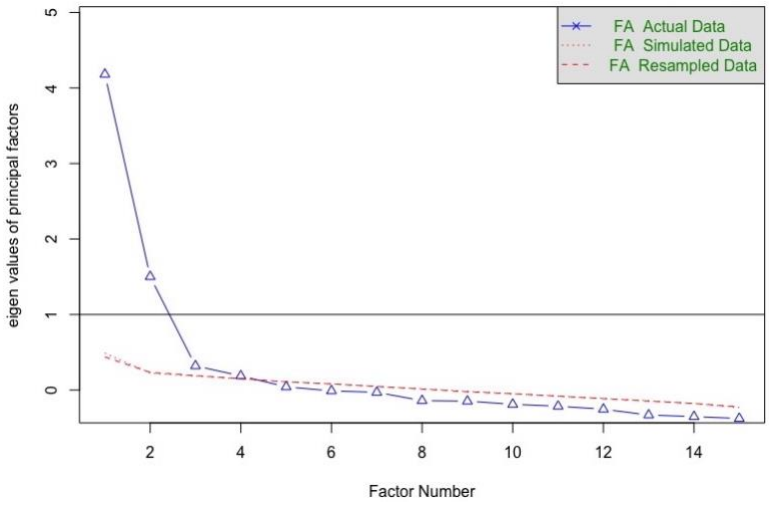
"Makes their profile page available to other users"	3.07	1.23	**.76**	.05	.03	-.05	.59
"Has sufficient knowledge and experience regarding the topic"	4.21	0.85	.01	**.65**	-.08	.05	.44
"Is engaged in providing high-quality answers to others' questions"	4.17	0.86	-.01	**.74**	.08	-.02	.56
"Encourages users to have polite and civil attitudes when interacting with other users"	3.90	0.94	.04	-.08	**.75**	.01	.55
"Has a polite and civil attitude in answering others' questions"	3.88	0.98	-.02	.08	**.77**	.00	.62
"Is known as an online source that provides expert information on a given topic"	3.96	0.80	.06	.00	-.07	**.66**	.44
"Is reputed to be a reliable source of information on the web"	4.09	0.76	-.06	.03	.09	**.64**	.46

Note. F1 = transparency; F2 = engaged authority; F3 = decency; F4 = community reputation.

5.2.2 Content

Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(153) = 3{,}713.71$, $p < .01$, and KMO (.91) indicated suitable data for EFA on content-related items (Bartlett, 1954; Kaiser, 1974). **A parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) suggested a three-factor solution (Figure 3).**

Figure 3. Parallel Analysis on Content-related Items



EFA using **principal axis factoring with promax rotation** identified three factors, explaining 49% of the total variance (Table 2): (a) reference reliability (content references and their reliability; α = .77); (b) unbiasedness (conflicting views and recent updates; α = .76); and (c) answer quality (accuracy, recency, pertinence, and evidence-based; α = .78).

Table 2. EFA on Content-Related Items (*N* = 598)

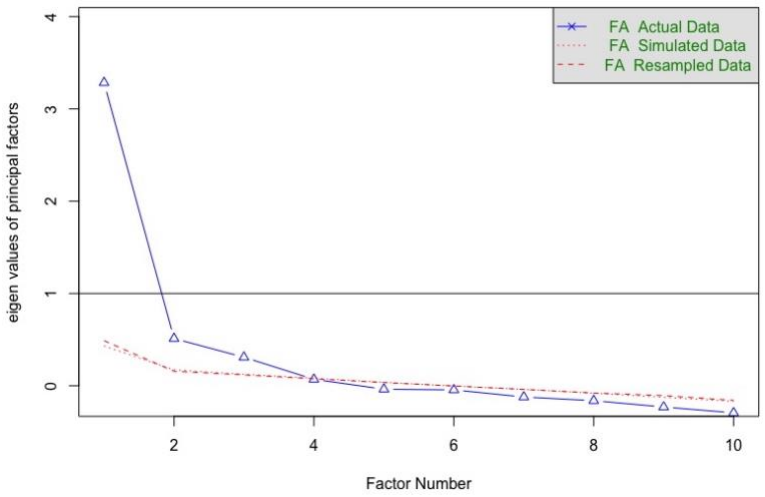
Item	*M*	*SD*	F1	F2	F3	h^2
"Accurately cites the sources of the provided information"	4.03	0.91	**.73**	-.05	.06	.55
"References reliable publications or sources"	4.04	0.92	**.72**	.00	.06	.58
"Displays links or references to the original sources of the provided information"	3.95	0.95	**.65**	.09	-.01	.49
"Covers conflicting views on a controversial topic"	3.4	1.10	-.04	**.71**	.01	.48
"Provides multiple points of view"	3.66	1.00	-.07	**.70**	.15	.48
"Conveys original and creative ideas"	3.34	1.15	.02	**.66**	-.10	.43
"Has been updated with additional content or evidence since its original post"	3.59	1.04	.30	**.49**	-.06	.46
"Provides relevant and applicable information to the question"	4.34	0.78	-.13	.12	**.78**	.52
"Provides accurate information"	4.45	0.78	.07	-.19	**.66**	.48
"Provides up-to-date information"	4.23	0.84	.02	.09	**.63**	.45
"Provides information based on valid and verifiable evidence"	4.25	0.89	.27	-.04	**.53**	.52

Note. F1 = reference reliability; F2 = unbiasedness; F3 = answer quality.

5.2.3 Design

Data suitability for EFA on design-related items was confirmed by Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(45) = 1.637.50$, $p < .001$, and KMO (.86; Bartlett, 1954; Kaiser, 1974). **Parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) recommended a three-factor solution (Figure 4).**

Figure 4. Parallel Analysis on Design-related Items



EFA with **principal axis factoring and promax rotation** identified three factors, accounting for 52% of the total variance (Table 3): (a) moderation (oversight tools; α = .72); (b) engaging design (user and content interactivity; α = .60); and (c) appropriate design (relevant to social Q&As; α = .64).

Table 3. EFA on Design-Related Items (*N* = 598)

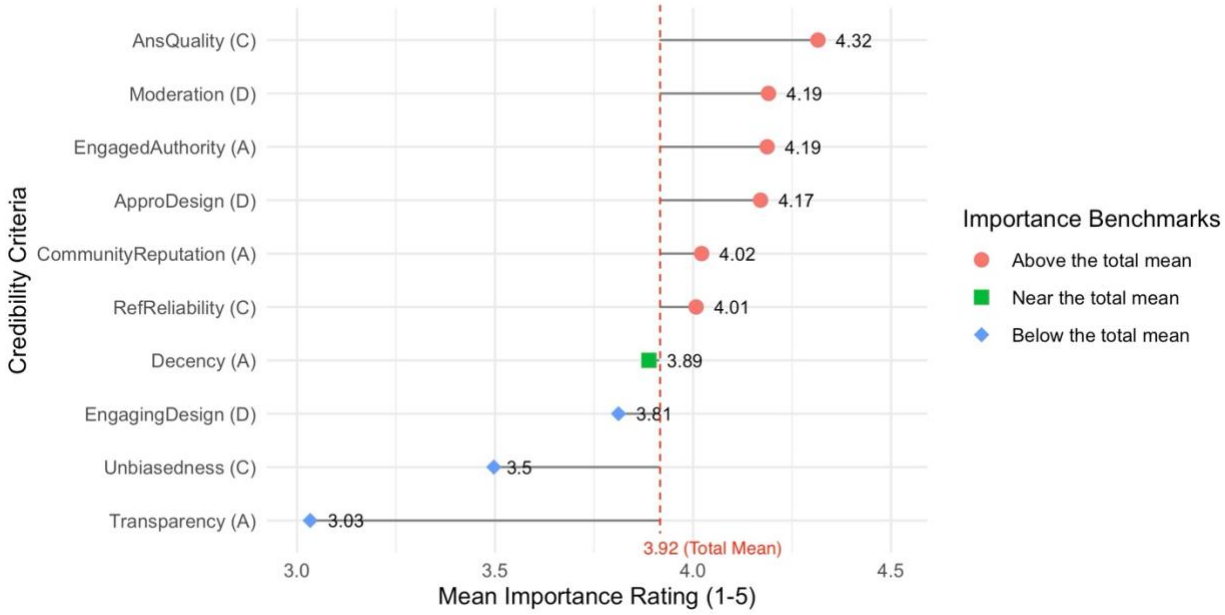
Item	*M*	*SD*	F1	F2	F3	h^2
"Controls malicious activities such as spamming, harassment, or offensive posts."	4.21	0.96	**.86**	-.15	.04	.66
"Allows users to report malicious activities to the moderator of the site (i.e., flagging)."	4.17	0.92	**.66**	.16	-.05	.52
"Provides features that enable users to interact with other users on the site."	3.73	1.02	-.09	**.85**	-.06	.61
"Provides features that enable users to provide feedback on answers or questions."	3.89	0.95	.10	**.46**	.10	.35
"Provides features that help users find relevant questions and answers for their information needs."	4.19	0.78	-.07	.05	**.73**	.52
"Focused on its main purposes, enabling users to ask questions, answer questions, and evaluate questions and answers."	4.15	0.84	.07	-.05	**.64**	.44

Note. F1 = moderation; F2 = engaging design; F3 = appropriate design.

5.3 One-Sample T-Tests

The mean importance of all criteria was 3.92 (*SD* = 0.49), suggesting that all factors were perceived as important in judging information credibility on social Q&A platforms. *T*-test results show that mean importance ratings for six criteria were significantly higher than the overall mean (3.92): answer quality (*M* = 4.32, *SD* = 0.63), *t*(597) = 15.44, *p* < .001; moderation (*M* = 4.19, *SD* = 0.83), *t*(597) = 8.14, *p* < .001; engaged authority (*M* = 4.19, *SD* = 0.74), *t*(597) = 9.01, *p* < .001; appropriate design (*M* = 4.17, *SD* = 0.69), *t*(597) = 9.03, *p* < .001; community reputation (*M* = 4.02, *SD* = 0.66), *t*(597) = 3.95, *p* < .001; and reference reliability (*M* = 4.01, *SD* = 0.77), *t*(597) = 2.95, *p* = .002 (Figure 5). The mean rating for decency, an author-related criterion, was statistically neither below nor above the total mean (*M* = 3.89, *SD* = 0.85), *t*(597) = -0.75.44, *p* = .226. Three criteria had mean ratings significantly lower than the total mean: engaging design (*M* = 3.81, *SD* = 0.83, *t*(597) = -3.04, *p* = .002; unbiasedness (*M* = 3.50, *SD* = 0.82), *t*(597) = -19.44, *p* < .001; and transparency (*M* = 3.03, *SD* = 1.11, *t*(597) = 15.44, *p* < .001.

Figure 5. Mean Importance Ratings on Credibility Criteria (*N* = 598)



Note. Characters in parentheses indicate their type: A = author or community, C = content, D = design.

5.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was conducted to evaluate the associations between factors identified by EFA (i.e., credibility judgment criteria) and two credibility dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise, controlling for user characteristics (e.g., **frequently searched topics**, demographics, information technology experience). The results (Table 4) suggest significant associations between five factors and trustworthiness or expertise (or both) at $p < .05$: trustworthiness with decency (β = .065, $p = .016$), community reputation (β = .119, $p < .001$), and appropriate design (β = .083, $p = .002$); and expertise with decency (β = .052, $p = .074$), community reputation (β = .080, $p = .002$), reference reliability (β = .093, $p = .003$), engaging design (β = .066, $p = .026$), and appropriate design (β = .070, $p = .016$). Two factors had marginally significant associations ($p < .10$): decency with expertise (β = .052, $p = .074$) and moderation with trustworthiness (β = .048, $p = .097$).

Table 4. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis (*N* = 598)

Variable	Trustworthiness			Expertise		
	β	*SE*	*p*	β	*SE*	*p*
Transparency	0.008	0.029	.787	0.024	0.031	.432
Engaged authority	0.003	0.027	.901	0.020	0.029	.487
Decency	0.065	0.027	**.016***	0.052	0.029	**.074**
Community reputation	0.119	0.023	**< .001*****	0.080	0.025	**.002****

Reference reliability	-0.036	0.029	.219	0.093	0.031	**.003****
Unbiasedness	0.042	0.031	.169	-0.002	0.033	.961
Answer quality	0.043	0.033	.197	-0.009	0.036	.798
Moderation	0.048	0.029	**.097**	-0.011	0.031	.734
Engaging design	0.024	0.027	.373	0.066	0.029	**.026***
Appropriate design	0.083	0.027	**.002****	0.070	0.029	**.016***
Age						
30–49	0.012	0.083	.882	-0.205	0.090	**.023***
50+	0.072	0.098	.464	-0.211	0.106	**.047***
Prefer not to answer	-0.697	0.771	.366	-0.121	0.832	.885
Sex						
Female	-0.004	0.055	.944	-0.146	0.059	**.014***
Other	0.437	0.448	.329	-0.136	0.483	.778
Education						
Some college	-0.036	0.097	.713	-0.104	0.105	.320
Undergraduate	0.070	0.089	.433	0.022	0.096	.821
Graduate	0.107	0.110	.331	-0.065	0.118	.580
Topic						
Technology	0.031	0.088	.721	-0.060	0.094	.523
Entertainment, arts, and travel	0.099	0.094	.292	0.005	0.102	.964
Government and politics	0.079	0.116	.497	-0.186	0.125	.137
Health and sciences	0.104	0.086	.229	-0.023	0.093	.803
Other	-0.007	0.123	.958	0.115	0.133	.386
Internet experience						
5+ years	0.485	0.082	**< .001*****	0.114	0.089	.199
Daily internet use						
5–9 hours	-0.034	0.061	.577	-0.024	0.065	.716
10+ hours	-0.078	0.077	.316	-0.032	0.083	.704
Social Q&A experience						
1–4 years	0.033	0.078	.677	-0.059	0.084	.488
5+ years	-0.086	0.086	.317	-0.129	0.093	.167
Social Q&A use						
Weekly	0.095	0.066	.150	0.103	0.071	.151
Daily	0.077	0.075	.305	0.003	0.080	.968
R^2	.28			.21		
F	7.38			4.95		
p	< .001			< .001		
df	30, 567			30, 567		

Note. Standardized path coefficients in bold indicate significant associations at $p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

6. Discussion

6.1 Differentiating Criteria Reflecting the Collective and Interactive Nature of Social Q&A

Six criteria were significantly associated with one or both credibility dimensions, indicating their practical relevance to social Q&A sites: community reputation, appropriate design, reference reliability,

engaging design, decency, and moderation (Table 4). As content-focused and collaborative peer-knowledge production platforms (Zhu and Chen, 2015), social Q&A sites prioritize community-based interactions, and these criteria reflect the interactive and collective dynamics at play. Community reputation was strongly linked to both trustworthiness and expertise, highlighting users' reliance on the perceived credibility of the community over individual authors. This finding supports the shift from traditional markers of authority, such as formal titles or credentials, to the community-driven, aggregated credibility assessments (Jessen and Jørgensen, 2011).

All three design-related criteria—appropriate design, interactive design, and moderation—had significant associations with credibility perceptions, highlighting the importance of platform design. This finding is consistent with prior research on social media (Chang *et al.*, 2021; Wu *et al.*, 2020) and broader web environments (Choi *et al.*, 2022; Sbaffi and Rowley, 2017). In social Q&A, design features that facilitate user participation in content creation and evaluation (e.g., "best answers," likes, up-votes) along with transparent moderation practices (e.g., flagging) appear to support credibility (Kumar and Pedanekar, 2016). These interactive design features play a key role in enabling collective credibility assessments in social Q&A communities.

Among content-focused criteria, only reference reliability was significantly linked to credibility (i.e., expertise). Different from other content attributes, the accuracy and completeness of references are verifiable by cross-checking, which appeared to make the criterion practically applicable to social Q&A credibility assessments. This finding also suggests this criterion is applicable beyond social Q&A platforms to emerging environments, such as GenAI. Users evaluating GenAI outputs often cross-validate the cited references to assess credibility (Choi *et al.*, 2024; Ou *et al.*, 2024).

On anonymous platforms, decency—reflecting polite and respectful communication—emerged as an important criterion for credibility, especially perceived trustworthiness. This criterion emphasizes the social and affective aspects of credibility on collaborative social media platforms (Choi *et al.*, 2023).

6.2 Baseline and Inapplicable Criteria Reflecting Individual Authors or Content

Two highly rated criteria—answer quality and engaged authority—showed no significant relationships with either dimension. This finding can be interpreted in two ways. First, these criteria represent foundational elements of credible information—content quality and source reliability—consistently identified as essential in prior research (Fu and Oh, 2019; Kim, 2010). As such, these criteria **may serve more** as baseline expectations rather than distinct markers in social Q&A credibility assessments. Users might assume their presence and focus on more variable criteria. Second, although users conceptually value criteria traditionally emphasized in static web and print media (e.g.,

completeness, author qualifications), these may be harder to verify in dynamic, user-generated social media environments (Keshavarz, 2021; Qureshi *et al.*, 2021). In other words, the conceptual importance of criteria is not always synchronized with their operational application to credibility assessments.

In the same context, transparency, or availability of the author's identity, received a below-average importance rating and showed no significant association with credibility perceptions. Because author profiles available online might not accurately represent their expertise and motivations for information provision (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kim, 2010), users seemed to neither value nor apply this criterion in their assessments of information on social Q&A platforms.

Another low-rated criterion, unbiasedness—or the presentation of multiple perspectives in an answer—had no significant relationship with either credibility dimension. This suggests that users on social Q&A platforms are typically seeking direct, actionable answers rather than a balanced or comprehensive understanding (Choi *et al.*, 2014). Given the participatory nature of these platforms—where users collectively build knowledge through questions, answers, comments, and ratings (Shah *et al.*, 2009)—unbiasedness may be distributed across answers rather than expected in individual answers.

6.3 A Revised Framework for Social Q&A Web Credibility Assessment

The empirical data in the current study validated and updated the prior 21-criterion framework (Choi *et al.*, 2023), streamlining it into a more parsimonious and empirically grounded eight-criterion framework (Figure 6). The revised framework includes the six criteria with high importance ratings and significant associations with at least one dimension of credibility: community reputation, decency, engaged authority, reference reliability, appropriate design, engaging design, and moderation. Two highly rated criteria lacking significant relationships with credibility dimensions—answer quality and engaged authority—are also included as basic requirements for credible information on social Q&A platforms, as consistently identified in prior research (Fu and Oh, 2019; Kang, 2010; Keshavarz, 2021; Kim, 2010). Transparency and unbiasedness are excluded, given their significantly low conceptual and operational importance in web credibility assessments of community-created knowledge.

The revised framework (Figure 6) refines the conceptual relationships between individual criteria and the two dimensions of information credibility. Community reputation and appropriate design predicted both trustworthiness and expertise. Decency and moderation influenced trustworthiness only, reflecting users' tendency to assess social integrity through behavioral and interactional cues. In contrast, reference reliability and engaging design emerged as significant predictors of expertise only, suggesting that users associate expert knowledge with accurate and reliable external sources and an interactive interface that may facilitate collective knowledge production.

Although answer quality and engaged authority were not statistically significant predictors, they are positioned with the dimension to which they were more closely related. The framework also includes example cues for each criterion to support future empirical application.

Figure 6. Revised Framework for Web Credibility Assessments on Social Q&A

Three Types of Web Credibility	Two Underlying Dimensions of Credibility: Trustworthiness	Two Underlying Dimensions of Credibility: Expertise
Author/ Community	• **<u>Community Reputation:</u>** The extent to which the community is reputed as a reliable source of online information on a give topic. ▪ Focus of the community (e.g., subreddits) ▪ Number of users • **Decency:** The extent to which civil and respectful communication is practiced by the author or the community. ▪ History of being flagged for violating the site's policies	• **<u>Community Reputation</u>** • *Engaged Authority:* The extent to which the author has knowledge and experience and willingness to provide high-quality answers. ▪ Top contributor badges ▪ Number of answers on a certain topic
Content	• *Answer Quality:* The extent to which the answer is of high quality. ▪ Number of upvotes ▪ Last updated date or edit history	• **Reference Reliability:** The extent to which the content is supported by identifiable, accurate, and high-quality sources. ▪ Proportion of accurate links to original sources (vs. hallucinated citations) ▪ Citations with DOIs or links to peer-reviewed sources
Design	• **<u>Appropriate Design:</u>** The extent to which the design of the site is relevant to the main purposes of social Q&A, such as asking, answering, and evaluating questions. ▪ User guide encouraging to focus on questioning and answering ▪ Prompts that remind users to cite sources • **Moderation:** The extent to which the design of the site facilitates the identification, regulation, and removal of inappropriate activities or low-quality content. ▪ Availability of features to report malicious activities	• **<u>Appropriate Design</u>** • **Engaging Design:** The extent to which the design of the site facilitates the collaborative knowledge production and sharing. ▪ Availability of interactive features (e.g., up/down votes)

Note. Credibility criteria with statistically significant relationships with both credibility dimensions are underlined. Criteria rated highly for their conceptual importance but not significantly related to either dimension are italicized.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and planning future research. First, the use of single-item measures to assess the core credibility dimensions—trustworthiness and expertise—may have simplified these constructs. Future studies should use validated multi-item scales to enhance reliability and construct validity. Second, despite identifying significant associations between credibility criteria and perceived trustworthiness or expertise, analyses did not establish causal relationships. Experimental or longitudinal research designs could clarify these causal mechanisms in specific digital contexts. Third, some factors yielded relatively low Cronbach's alphas, potentially due to the limited number of items. This highlights the need for research that incorporates more comprehensive item sets to improve internal consistency. Fourth, the revised framework's (Figure 6) suggested relationships and example cues should be interpreted as provisional, given the exploratory nature of the study and the **broad scope of platforms and topic domains (i.e., participants could select any social Q&A sites and information topics when responding to the survey)**. Future validation efforts should refine and test this conceptual model across more defined or **site- and topic-specific contexts** to accumulate evidence for its applicability and generalizability.

Despite these limitations, the study is grounded in strong theoretical foundations and offers a meaningful starting point, sported by empirical data, for understanding how users access credibility in peer-based knowledge production environments.

7. Conclusions

Using online survey data (N = 598), we examined what makes online information on social Q&A sites credible. In particular, we conducted EFA to identify criteria for evaluating information credibility in three categories of author or community, content, and design (Fogg, 2003); one-sample t-tests to determine the perceived importance of the identified factors; and multiple regression to determine the associations between criteria and credibility dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland *et al.*, 1953) while controlling for user characteristics, such as demographics, **topic interests**, platform familiarity, and internet experiences.

Our findings suggest that although users conceptually value traditional credibility criteria related to answer quality and author credentials, these **may not** strongly influence operational credibility judgments in peer-based environments. Instead, users **appear to place greater emphasis** on criteria that reflect the interactive and communal nature of social Q&A platforms, including community reputation, design features enabling user interactions, moderation, and civility. Moreover, distinct patterns emerged for the two credibility dimensions: Reference reliability and engaging design significantly predicted perceptions of expertise, whereas decency and community reputation were more associated with trustworthiness. Based on these results, we revised the prior credibility framework (Choi *et al.*, 2023) by offering a more parsimonious, empirically grounded framework that emphasizes platform-specific and socially constructed criteria and their associations with trustworthiness and expertise. As digital information environments evolve, especially with the growing presence of GenAI, our findings underscore the importance of rethinking how credibility is assessed in collaborative and AI-mediated knowledge contexts. **The revised framework can inform platform governance by identifying design priorities (e.g., moderation tools, interactive feedback systems); support educational efforts to teach practical credibility cues and heuristics related to the source, content, and design as part of digital literacy; and guide institutional or governmental policy development for ensuring credible user- or GenAI-generated content in public-facing digital spaces.**

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