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Hostile Media Perception, Media Cynicism, and the Vulnerability to Fake News in the Korean Context

LEE Kwangho*

The term “*giregi*” is widely employed in Korea as a derogatory label for journalists. It combines the Korean words “*gija*,” meaning reporter, and “*sregi*,” which means “garbage,” conveying the notion of “reporter producing low-quality news.” The phrase “garbage journalism” is also used in English-speaking countries like the U.S. and Canada, while the French term “*des ordures*,” meaning garbage, is frequently employed in press criticism on Twitter (currently X). German tweets have featured the hashtag #MüllJournalismus, meaning “garbage journalism,” for over a decade, and the hashtag #PeriodismoBasura has also been used in Spanish tweets.

Despite the widespread disdain for the news media, little study has addressed this issue. The prior works (Lee, 2019; 2020a; 2020b) explore the prevailing contemptuous attitude toward the news media in Korean society through “media cynicism.” Lee demonstrates that media cynicism is closely linked to “hostile media perception” and is partially related to the use of political information sources based on their partisan inclinations.

This study examines the current state of hostile media perceptions and media cynicism in South Korean society. It aims to explore the relationship between these attitudes toward media and the vulnerability to fake news and other forms of misinformation.

Theoretical Background

*The Concept of Media Cynicism*¹

First, this study discusses two main concepts: media cynicism and hostile media perceptions. Media cynicism is first introduced in Cappella & Jamieson’s (1996) study. They employed the idea of media cynicism to caution against the potential boomerang effect of media political coverage, which could result in political

* Professor at the Faculty of Letters, Keio University

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cynicism turning into cynicism toward the press. However, they did not provide a clear definition of media cynicism. Based on the measurement scale they utilized for media cynicism and political cynicism, Lee (2019) defined media cynicism as “an attitude of belittling and ridiculing the news media, stemming from the belief that news workers, news organizations, and the media institution as a whole lack ethics and competence” (p. 88).

Lee (2019) examined the state of media cynicism in Korean society regarding this definition. Contrary to the definition, the findings revealed that evaluating the “media institution as a whole” did not significantly relate with news workers’ and organizations’ assessments. Based on the findings, it is assumed that excluding the evaluation of “media institution as a whole” from the conceptual definition of media cynicism is necessary. Therefore, the definition has been modified to emphasize derogatory attitudes toward “news workers and organizations.”

Factors of Media Cynicism

Concerning factors related to media cynicism, the primary focus of this study is “hostile media perception,” which was identified in the experiments conducted by Vallone et al. (1985). Hostile media perception refers to the cognitive distortion observed among partisans when they encounter the same news content, wherein they tend to interpret the news as biased against their camp. Initially, scholarly attention was directed toward distorted information processing of specific political coverage influenced by group affiliations such as ethnicity (e.g., Israel vs. Arabs). However, subsequent research has demonstrated that this phenomenon extends to coverage of social issues such as abortion and sports reporting (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Arpan & Raney, 2003; Hansen & Kim, 2011).

While the traditional concept of hostile media perceptions primarily encompassed perceptions of a “specific” or “set” of news coverage, as mentioned above, Lee (2019, 2020a, 2021a) argues for expanding its scope to include perceptions of a “specific news organization” as well. This indicates that hostile media perceptions can arise from the content of a single report and a news organization’s consistent coverage across multiple issues, which opposes one’s own position. Although previous research on hostile media perceptions did not explicitly consider news organizations as targets of hostile perceptions, exploring such perceptions would provide valuable insight into investigating the reality and dynamics of pervasive adverse reactions toward the media nowadays.

It has been hypothesized that hostile media perceptions are influenced by the intensity of attitudes toward different issues: The stronger an individual’s stance on an issue, the greater the likelihood of experiencing hostile media perceptions when coming across news reports contradicting their viewpoint. Additionally, it can be inferred that hostile media perceptions are most pronounced when individuals hold strong attitudes across multiple issues and when a specific news organization

consistently presents coverage that contradicts their viewpoints. Considering the strength of consistent attitudes toward multiple issues as partisanship, the intensity of partisanship would be a significant factor in shaping hostile media perceptions. Lee (2020a, 2020b) examined survey data conducted in 2019 in Korea, confirming the relationship among the three variables: partisanship → hostile media perception → media cynicism.

Perceptions of “media partisanship,” which refers to the belief that a particular news organization consistently holds strong biases across various issues, may also influence hostile media perceptions. Those with higher levels of partisanship are more likely to experience heightened hostile media perceptions toward outlets perceived as highly partisan in directions contrary to their own. This perception is based on how a specific media outlet is “perceived”, independent of its actual stance on multiple issues. For instance, in Korea, newspapers such as *the Chosun-Ilbo*, *Donga-Ilbo*, and *Joongang-Ilbo* are regarded as conservative, while *the Hankyoreh-Shinmun* and *Kyunghyang-Shinmun* are viewed as progressive. This “reputation” alone can lead to hostile media perceptions, even among those who do not regularly read these respective newspapers.

The process of devaluing the journalistic practices and ethics of media outlets considered “hostile” to one’s position can be comprehended through cognitive dissonance theory. However, how can we explain the development of a cynical attitude toward the “media in general,” including media aligned with one’s camp?

To shed light on this, we can turn to Schwarz & Bless’s (1991) “inclusion/exclusion model of assimilation and contrast effect.” According to their theory, when forming a judgment, we create a provisional representation of the judgment object and the criteria we use in our minds. Suppose the information used to form the representation of the judgment criteria is included in the judgment object. In that case, it would result in an assimilation effect, whereas a contrast effect would arise if it is excluded. In an experiment conducted by Schwarz & Bless (1992) with 32 German university students as participants, they were asked to write the name of a scandalized politician and then rate the trustworthiness of “politicians in general” compared to the trustworthiness of an “individual politician.” The participants who were asked to rate politicians in general exhibited an assimilation effect, linking the scandal with politicians in general. In contrast, those who were asked to rate a specific politician experienced a contrast effect, unlinking the individual politician with the scandal.

This mechanism can also explain how hostile media perceptions lead to cynicism toward the “media in general.” When evaluating cynicism toward the “media in general,” individuals with high levels of hostile media perception are expected to experience an assimilation effect because they include “hostile media” within their evaluation of the “media in general.” As a result, their evaluation of the “media in general” tends to be lower compared to individuals with low levels of

hostile media perception.

We can also explain how hostile media perceptions evolve into media cynicism not as a mere “cognitive bias” but as a conscious and rational evaluation process. Even when we are content with the partisanship of our preferred media outlets, we can rationally recognize that their journalistic practices do not always adhere to professionalism, such as impartiality or comprehensive factual reporting. Recognizing various problems of hostile media in preferred media is also possible. It is not challenging to generalize these problems observed in hostile media as structural flaws of the “media in general,” including those we support. This tendency becomes particularly evident when opposing camps criticize each other’s media.

Another factor related to media cynicism is the exposure to the discourse criticizing media, frequently encountered through news reader’s comments on social networking sites and portal sites. Exposure to the discourse criticizing media can lead to the development of media cynicism by diminishing one’s assessment of the performance and ethical standards of the “media in general.”

Consequences of Media Cynicism

As cynical attitudes toward the news media intensify, there may be changes in media consumption patterns, particularly regarding its role as a source of political information. It is considered that reliance on mainstream mass media will decline, which represents established journalism such as national newspapers and televised coverage, while selective engagement with alternative media aligned with one’s partisan leanings will increase (Tsfati & Peri, 2006; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Omar & Ahrari, 2020). For instance, Tsfati and Peri (2006) conducted a telephone survey involving 1,219 individuals in Israel. They discovered a skeptical outlook toward mainstream media, including the three highest-circulation newspapers, three television stations, and the largest English-language newspaper. The skepticism toward mainstream media indicated a higher level of using non-mainstream media, such as sectarian media and media catering to Arab and Russian expatriates.

Furthermore, while harboring strong skepticism toward mainstream media does not necessarily imply a complete abandonment of their usage, the findings demonstrate that individuals with greater exposure to non-mainstream media have less access to mainstream media. In a study conducted in Korea, Lee (2020a) observed that individuals with heightened media cynicism were less likely to rely on mainstream television stations as a source of political information.

Theoretically, as media cynicism grows, we anticipate a decline in the use of news media as a reliable source of information. However, other forms of media engagement may persist or even increase: “strategic use” to stay informed about opposing partisan claims and plans, “cathartic use” to express anger and feel superior through ridicule and contempt, and “entertainment use” to enjoy the excitement of partisan conflict while supporting one’s own camp are some ways in

which media can be utilized. Thus, media cynicism may lead to more frequent use of news media. In a survey conducted in Korea, Lee (2021a) found that individuals with moderate media cynicism engage in political news consumption and enjoyment to a greater extent.

Media cynicism also manifests as a sense of “resignation” toward the media’s role in shaping public opinion, which represents a “disappointment” that the diverse opinions of citizens are not adequately reflected in the political process. Consequently, we can anticipate a growing inclination to move away from representation through media and toward direct means of expressing opinions, such as through demonstrations. In some instances, this may escalate into violent forms of expression, including vandalism or terrorism. For example, Tsafati & Cohen’s (2005) study on Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip revealed that “media distrust,” driven by hostile media perceptions, significantly related to a lack of trust in the media and democratic processes, which in turn heightened intentions to resist the migration policy of the Sharon regime through “violent means.” In short, the study confirmed the following relationship: “hostile media perception → media distrust → distrust in democracy → inclinations toward violent resistance.”

Fake news vulnerability and Fake news experience

Another consequence of media cynicism we examine in this study is the vulnerability to fake news and the experience of being deceived by it. The study focuses primarily on the connection between media cynicism and Fake News Vulnerability (FNV). Research indicates that FNV is influenced by individuals’ partisan leanings. People tend to prioritize the accuracy of fake news that aligns with their ideological orientation (Calvillo et al., 2020; Deinla et al., 2022). However, other studies suggest that susceptibility to fake news arises from cognitive laziness rather than motivated cognitive processing driven by partisanship (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Another research attributes this susceptibility to a critical and skeptical attitude that extends to doubting even accurate information (Gaillard et al., 2021) and the presence of “confusion” within the information framework upon which factual judgments are based. In other words, exposure to false information may hinder correct judgment by fostering confusion and doubt (Rapp & Salovich, 2018).

Few studies have explored the influence of attitudes toward the news media, including media cynicism, on FNV. Based on previous research, this study hypothesizes two potential relationships between media cynicism and FNV. Firstly, media cynicism may enhance resistance to fake news. Media cynicism increases the likelihood of identifying and discerning fake news by fostering suspicion and skepticism toward news reporting. Hence, a negative correlation between media cynicism and FNV can be expected.

On the other hand, media cynicism can also render individuals more vulnerable to fake news. As media cynicism intensifies and skepticism regarding news accuracy

grows, individuals may find themselves in a state of confusion regarding the basis for their judgments of correctness. This heightened confusion can facilitate the acceptance of fake news. Likewise, media cynicism may also be associated with susceptibility to conspiracy theories.

Additionally, media cynicism may amplify exposure to alternative media platforms characterized by intense political stances, such as social media, YouTube channels, and podcasts, thereby increasing the likelihood of encountering fake news. As the foundation for making factual judgments weakens, infusing more fake news into this information framework further impairs the ability to make accurate judgments and increases vulnerability to fake news.

In addition, FNV is likely to increase Fake News Experiences (FNE), which refers to instances of being deceived by fake news. This study defines fake news as “inaccurate information disseminated through news media and social media, presented as factual.”

While certain definitions of fake news require the element of “intentional fabrication” (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc Jr., 2017), adopting such a definition would entail verifying the intent of each fabricator to determine whether the information meets the criteria of fake news. Given the challenges of identifying fabricator and confirming intent, gathering empirical evidence and conducting investigations are difficult. Moreover, the fabricator’s intentionality may not be relevant regarding fake news vulnerability.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Based on the above discussions, this study posits the following research questions and hypotheses:

- H1. The intensity of partisanship increases hostile media perception, which in turn leads to media cynicism.
- RQ1. To what extent is media cynicism associated with fake news vulnerability?
- H2. Fake news vulnerability increases fake news experiences.
- RQ2. To what extent is media cynicism associated with fake news experiences?

Methodology

This study collected data from 1,044 Korean participants (aged 16-69) through

a web survey conducted in March 2022. The median age of the respondents was 41 years. Teenagers and those in their early 20s were relatively fewer, as were individuals over 65, but the other age groups were well-represented and balanced. Male respondents accounted for 53.8% of the sample, while female respondents accounted for 46.2%. Approximately 54.4% of the respondents were residents of metropolitan areas, including Seoul. Regarding occupation, the largest group consisted of company employees, comprising 61.8% of the respondents.

The measurement scale for each concept is as follows:

- Hostile media perception (HMP) was assessed using a set of five items developed by Lee (2021a) ($\alpha=.908$). Mean scores of all items were around three on a 4-point scale, indicating a relatively high level of HMP. This measurement scale demonstrated high reliability and unidimensionality. A composite scale was created by calculating principal component scores to capture the significance of each item.
- Media cynicism (MC) was measured by 18 items developed by Lee (2021a) ($\alpha=.913$). This measurement includes nine items evaluating journalistic performance of individual journalists and news organizations, seven measuring perceptions of their self-serving motives, and two evaluating derogatory attitudes toward them. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the major variables. Media cynicism was assessed on a five-point scale, with items related to journalistic performance yielding the lowest mean scores. In contrast, items related to self-serving motives had the highest mean scores (see Table 1). The mean score of items about derogatory attitudes was the highest, indicating a significant level of media cynicism in South Korea. Given the multiple dimensions, a composite scale was created by summing the principal component scores of the 18 items.
- Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from “1=very conservative” to “7=very liberal.” The original scores were transformed to assign higher partisanship scores to individuals who leaned more conservative or liberal.
- Fake news vulnerability (FNV) refers to the inclination to perceive fake news as accurate. Participants were asked to evaluate the accuracy of seven fake news statements using a 5-point scale (1=False, 5=True). The scores were combined to create a composite index of FNV. The seven fake news statements were selected from the lists of fake news published by the Seoul National University Fact Check Center. They are presented in Table 1, with the accompanying mean accuracy judgment scores. A higher score indicates

a greater tendency to misjudge the accuracy of the fake news and a higher vulnerability to it.

Due to the inconsistent accuracy judgments for the seven fake news items ($\alpha=.640$), a principal component analysis was conducted. The analysis revealed two principal components: FNV_easy, representing “easy” fake news (1, 2, 3, 4, 6), which had a relatively higher number of correct answers, and FNV_subtle, representing “subtle” fake news (5, 8), which had fewer correct answers. Interestingly, FNV_easy showed little association with political orientation, while FNV_subtle strongly related to political orientation. Therefore, FNV_easy and FNV_subtle were analyzed separately.

- Fake News Experiences (FNE, $\alpha=.724$) measured the frequency of experiences being deceived by fake news on a 4-point scale. Participants were asked about their experiences of encountering news they initially believed to be accurate but later turned out to be fake news, sharing information that was later revealed to be fake news with others, and sharing information on social media that was later identified as fake news.

The following variables were also included in the analysis. The composite scores for these variables were created by summing the measurement scores.

- Subjective news literacy (SNL, $\alpha=.877$) was assessed using a 5-point scale to measure confidence in understanding the news production process. The scale included the following statements: “I am familiar with how news is produced,” “I am familiar with how reporters cover the news,” “I am familiar with how the news media operates,” and “I am familiar with our country’s media system.”
- Use of Mass media as a source of political information ($\alpha=.709$) was measured on a 5-point scale, assessing the extent to which participants rely on TV news, newspaper and news agency articles, and radio news for political information.
- Use of alternative media as a source of political information ($\alpha=.849$) was evaluated on a 5-point scale, capturing the degree of engagement with YouTube, podcasts, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and *KakaoTalk* (a free messenger app widely used in Korea) as sources of political information.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Major Variables

Variables	Measurement Items	Mean	SD
Hostile Media Perception ($\alpha=.908$)	<i>Are there any domestic news media that feel the following? (1= not at all, 4= many)</i>		
	News media disagreeing with my views.	2.95	0.76
	News media reporting against the politicians or parties I support.	2.99	0.80
	News media defending people or countries that I don't like.	3.00	0.79
	News media making me angry to watch	3.03	0.83
	News media making me feel hostility to watch.	2.82	0.87
Media Cynicism ($\alpha=.913$)	<i>How do you think about the following comments about Korean reporters and news organizations (1= strongly disapprove, 5= strongly approve)</i>		
	Korean journalists are politically neutral in their reporting	2.54	1.07
	Korean journalists are dedicated to reporting facts	2.65	1.08
	Korean journalists have expertise in journalism	2.98	1.10
	Korean journalists are working hard to uncover the truth	2.93	1.12
	Korean journalists are sincerely reporting and covering stories for the people's right to know	2.96	1.14
	Korean journalists use their position to get good treatment and private benefits	3.54	0.99
	Korean journalists are cozying up with the political and business elites	3.74	0.93
	Korean journalists are waiting for the right time to enter politics.	3.39	1.01
	Korean journalists are using coverage for their own political purposes	3.66	1.00
	I can relate to the contempt that journalist are called "Giregi"	3.93	0.98
	Korean news organizations remain politically neutral	2.52	1.04
	Korean news organizations are highly professionalized	3.02	1.08
	Korean news organizations report without concern for the government	2.56	1.14
	Korean news organizations are working hard to reveal the truth	2.93	1.10
Korean news organizations are more interested in generating revenue than the public's right to know	3.79	0.97	
	Korean news organizations are trying to use their status to exert influence	3.79	0.95
	Korean news organizations are using coverage for their own political purposes	3.77	0.97
	I can relate to the contempt for journalists as a group of "Giregis".	3.87	1.00
Fake News Vulnerability ($\alpha=.640$)	<i>Do you think the following statements are true? (1=False, 5= True)</i>		
	The U.S. Is actually handing arms to Russia	2.22	1.09
	Most child abuse stems from "discipline"	2.64	1.11
	Women in other countries do not get vaccinated against cervical cancer	2.56	1.00
	South Korea's COVID-19 controls are among the weakest in the world	2.41	1.13
	KEPCO's electricity price hike is due to rapid nuclear phase-out	3.06	1.17
	Comments on portal news sites reflect public opinion	2.94	0.97
	South Korea is the only country in the world where prosecutors have a monopoly on investigating, prosecuting, and seeking warrants.	3.14	1.08
Fake News Experience ($\alpha=.724$)	<i>Have you ever experienced any of the following?(1= not at all, 4= frequently)</i>		
	An experience of having news they thought was factual but later turned out to be fake news	3.00	0.67
	An experience of telling information to the people around but later turned out to be fake news	2.77	0.75
	An experience of sharing information on social media but later turned out to be fake news	2.52	0.94

Findings and Discussions

Table 2 displays the correlations among the main variables. As anticipated, there were significant positive correlations between the intensity of partisanship and HMP, as well as between HMP and MC.

The relationships between MC and FNV varied depending on the type of FNVs. MC has a significant negative correlation with FNV_easy but a positive correlation with FNV_subtle. In other words, the stronger the MC, the better they identified easy fake news but tended to be deceived by subtle fake news.

Moreover, as predicted, SNL exhibited a significant positive correlation with MC. A sense of confidence in one's knowledge about the news production process may underlie a cynical attitude toward the media. Interestingly, SNL was positively associated with FNV and FNE. Individuals who believe they possess extensive knowledge about the news media are more susceptible to fake news and are more likely to have fallen for it.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for Major Variables

	PS	HMP	MC	SNL	FNV_easy	FNV_subtle
HMP	.254**					
MC	.125**	.556**				
SML	.205**	.306**	.187**			
FNV_easy	.038	-.055	-.147**	.208**		
FNV_subtle	.006	.152**	.219**	.076*	.000	
FNE	.105**	.388**	.324**	.322**	.141**	.147**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3 shows the results of multiple regression analysis with two types of FNVs and FNE as dependent variables. MC was the sole significant predictor among all independent variables for both types of FNV and FNE. Interestingly, it exhibited a negative impact on FNV_easy but a positive impact on FNV_subtle. This implies that MC fosters skepticism, making individuals less susceptible to easily detectable fake news while increasing their vulnerability to ideologically driven and subtly deceptive fake news. Since this analysis included only two FNV_subtle news stories, further study is needed to fully understand the intricate relationship between MC and FNV with a larger sample of news stories.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting FNV_easy, FNV_subtle, and FNE

Variables	FNV_easy	FNV_subtle	FNE
Sex	.030	.057	.045
Age	-.059*	-.017	-.094**
PS	.008	-.052	-.027
HMP	-.043	.061	.211**
MC	-.126**	.188**	.198**
Alt Media	.369**	.059	.221**
Mass Media	-.149**	-.086*	.012
SNL	.143**	.028	.144**
PO	-.053	.239**	-.016
R ²	.191**	.122**	.264**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Notes. PS: partisanship strength, HMP: hostile media perception, MC: media cynicism, Alt Media: use of alternative media as political information sources, Mass Media: use of mass media as political information sources, FNV_easy: vulnerability toward easily identifiable fake news, FNV_subtle: vulnerability toward fake news that is subtle to identify

For FNV_easy, the use of alternative media as political sources showed relatively more robust predictive power ($\beta = .369$), indicating that individuals relying on YouTube, podcasts, and social media for political information are more susceptible to easily detectable fake news. Additionally, higher SNL was associated with a tendency to fall for this type of fake news ($\beta = .143$). On the other hand, increased reliance on mass media as an information source was linked to lower FNV_easy ($\beta = -.149$).

In addition, the findings of this study on the FNV_subtle implied the current state of the political polarization of Korean society (e.g., Lee, 2020c, 2021b): Political orientation positively predicted FNV_subtle, which is understandable considering that one of the FNV_subtle fake news stories was more likely to be perceived as accurate by individuals with liberal beliefs.

Furthermore, apart from MC, FNE exhibited positive associations with HMP, reliance on alternative political sources, and SNL. As the likelihood of encountering a significant amount of fake news rises, individuals with higher HMP, MC, and confidence in their understanding of the news production process are more prone to being deceived by fake news.

Figure 1. Path Diagram from Partisanship Strength to Fake News Vulnerability via HMP and MC

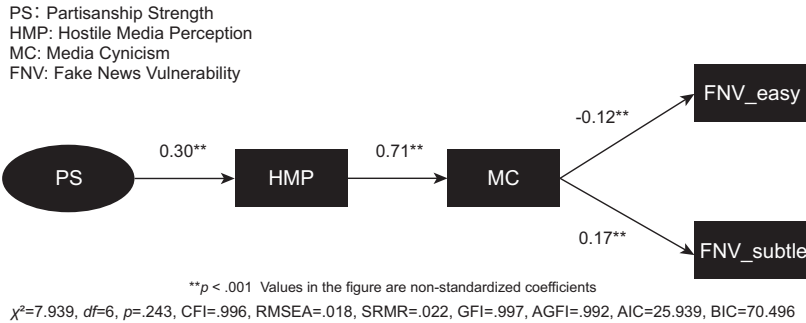


Figure 1 presents the findings of the Structural Equation Modeling, illustrating the path model among the variables as hypothesized in this study. The goodness of fit indices indicates a satisfactory fit. Consistent with expectations, PS leads to HMP, which in turn has a substantial impact on increasing MC. Since the path between PS and MC was not significant, it suggests that HMP is one of the mechanisms through which PS influences MC.

Similar to the regression analysis results above, MC exhibits a negative effect on FNV_easy and a positive effect on FNV_subtle. However, these effects are relatively small in magnitude.

Figure 2. Path Diagram from Partisanship Strength to Experiences Deceived by Fake News via HMP, MC, and Fake News Vulnerability

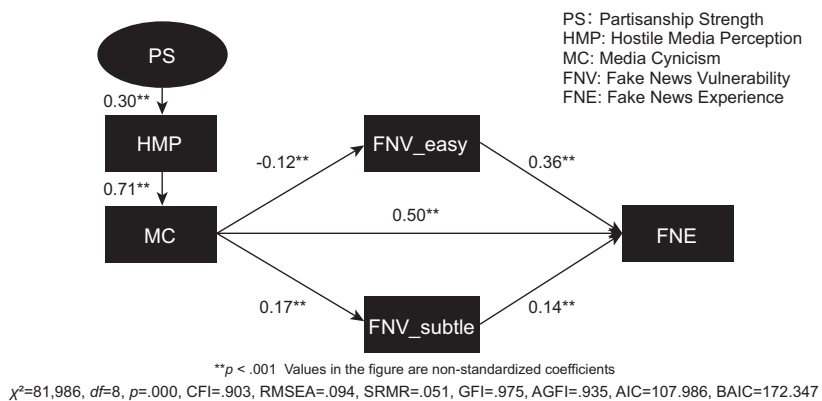


Figure 2 depicts the expanded model of Figure 1, incorporating the addition of FNE. Although the model's goodness of fitness indices is not highly satisfactory, it demonstrates that MC influences FNE directly and indirectly through two types of

FNV.

It is conceivable that harboring a contemptuous attitude toward established mainstream news outlets boosts FNE by facilitating access to alternative political sources and increasing exposure to fake news. MC may also amplify their skepticism toward mainstream media information and enhance their resistance to simplistic fake news. However, excessive suspicion can confuse the foundation of information upon which they base their judgments, rendering them more susceptible to fake news, particularly those that align with their preconceived political convictions and lead them astray.

This study showed that people's cynical attitudes toward the mainstream news media can affect their ability to identify fake news differently depending on the type of fake news. These results suggest that partisanship-originated and HMP-based media cynicism can make individuals more susceptible to misinformation that can be easily blinded by political positions. On the other hand, another form of media cynicism that may be fostered by other sources, such as media literacy or news literacy (although I have not yet examined), may work differently to vulnerability and resistance to fake news. Future research needs to investigate such issues.

Note

- ¹ For a more specific explanation of the concept of media cynicism, which Cappella & Jamieson(1996) proposed, refer to Lee(2022).

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