



The Impact of Digital Disinformation on Political Trust from the Perspective of the Digital Public Sphere in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the impact of digital disinformation on political trust from the perspective of the digital public sphere in Indonesia. The research addresses the growing circulation of misleading political information on social media and its implications for citizens' trust in political institutions, actors, media, and democratic processes. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of digital political conversations, and documentation of public posts, online news, and fact-checking materials. Participants consisted of active Indonesian social media users who had encountered political information whose credibility they questioned. Thematic analysis revealed five major findings: uncertainty in assessing political information, declining trust in official political communication, reliance on interpersonal and community-based verification, emotional fatigue and political withdrawal, and the fragmentation of the digital public sphere. These findings show that digital disinformation affects political trust not only by transmitting false claims but also by creating doubt, emotional exhaustion, and segmented political realities. The study contributes to political communication scholarship by emphasizing political trust as a mediated, relational, and affective experience within digital environments. The findings imply that responses to disinformation should include transparent institutional communication, rapid clarification, community-based digital literacy, and stronger collaboration among government institutions, media, civil society, and digital platforms. Future research may examine platform-specific dynamics or compare citizens' experiences across regions, generations, and political communities.



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1. Introduction

The development of the digital public sphere has transformed the way citizens access political information, form opinions, and evaluate state institutions. Globally, social media no longer functions merely as a channel for interpersonal communication; it has become a contested political arena where citizens, political elites, journalists, activists, influencers, bots, buzzers, and anonymous accounts interact within the same information ecosystem. In this environment, digital disinformation emerges as a democratic problem because deliberately manipulated information

can weaken public deliberation, obscure the boundary between fact and opinion, and encourage citizens to make political judgments based on misleading narratives. Jungherr and Schroeder (2021) argue that disinformation should be understood as part of the structural transformation of the digital public arena rather than as an isolated communication disorder. In contemporary democracy, this issue is increasingly significant because political trust is shaped not only by institutional performance but also by citizens' everyday encounters with political information in digital spaces.

In Indonesia, digital disinformation has become more complex due to the high intensity of social media use, persistent political polarization, and the presence of political communication actors who operate through partisan accounts, digital influencers, and buzzer networks. Elections, public policy debates, street demonstrations, and controversies involving state institutions show that social media often accelerates political issues while simultaneously enabling the circulation of rumors, accusations, fragmented videos, memes, screenshots, and viral claims that are difficult to verify. Sumartias and Pulubuhu (2023) show that Indonesia's digital public sphere, especially on Twitter/X, can function as a space for democratic participation, although it is also vulnerable to fragmented opinions and competing narratives that are not always grounded in rational argumentation. In everyday political communication, citizens often face ambiguous information situations in which the same political event is interpreted differently across platforms and communities. This condition indicates that political trust is influenced not only by direct experiences with the state but also by the quality, credibility, and emotional tone of information circulating in digital networks.

The central problem observed in the field is citizens' growing uncertainty in distinguishing between accurate political information, misinformation, satire, propaganda, and intentionally deceptive content. Recent empirical studies suggest that disinformation can weaken citizens' trust in government communication, electoral processes, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Humprecht (2025) found that trust in political actors, media, and democracy is associated with citizens' tendency to accept or disseminate disinformation. In the Indonesian context, Surjatmodjo et al. (2024) describe the spread of disinformation on social media as an "information pandemic" with implications for social and state resilience. At the level of lived experience, exposure to conflicting information may produce political fatigue, cynicism, anxiety, and suspicion toward public institutions. Therefore, the impact of disinformation is not merely cognitive, such as misunderstanding political facts, but also affective and relational because it touches citizens' emotions, social relationships, and trust in the state.

This issue is important to investigate because political trust is a form of social capital that supports citizen participation, policy acceptance, and democratic stability. When citizens are repeatedly exposed to narratives claiming that the government, electoral bodies, political parties, the media, or legal institutions are untrustworthy, the digital public sphere may shift from a space of deliberation into a space of collective suspicion. Chambers (2021) places informational accuracy as a crucial condition for deliberative democracy because healthy public discussion requires citizens to share at least some common factual references. From the perspective of Indonesia's social and political culture, disinformation cannot be separated from community-based communication patterns, group loyalty, religious affiliation, emotional attachment to political figures, and the habit of sharing information through family or community chat groups. For this reason, a qualitative study is needed to understand how citizens interpret disinformation, how they negotiate trust in political information, and how digital experiences shape their perceptions of political institutions.

Previous studies have examined disinformation through quantitative surveys, social network analysis, content analysis, platform governance studies, and digital literacy research. Tenove (2020) discusses the normative threats posed by disinformation to democracy and the policy responses needed to protect the public sphere. In Indonesia, recent studies have also examined digital democracy, civic education, digital literacy, hoaxes, hate speech, and electoral

communication. Zahirah (2025) emphasizes that citizens play an important role in countering disinformation and hate speech on social media. However, much of the existing literature still focuses on patterns of dissemination, actors, platform regulation, or mitigation strategies. Fewer studies have deeply explored citizens' subjective experiences of encountering political disinformation and the ways those experiences shape political trust. Thus, there remains a literature gap concerning how citizens build, lose, maintain, or restore political trust after being exposed to disinformation in the digital public sphere.

This gap is important because political trust is not merely a variable to be measured through surveys; it is also a social experience shaped through interaction, memory, emotion, conversation, and interpretation of political events. Trenz (2023) argues that the digital public sphere can be both disruptive and self-corrective, depending on how citizens, media institutions, and political actors respond to circulating information. The digital public sphere perspective provides a theoretical basis for viewing social media as an arena of political meaning-making rather than merely as a channel for message distribution. Through a qualitative approach, citizens' experiences can be explored by examining how they receive political information, why they trust or distrust particular sources, how they verify claims, and how their attitudes toward institutions change after exposure to particular digital narratives. Therefore, this study seeks to address the literature gap by placing citizens' lived experiences at the center of analysis rather than treating disinformation only as a technical, statistical, or platform-based phenomenon.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the impact of digital disinformation on political trust in Indonesia from the perspective of the digital public sphere. The study focuses on citizens' experiences in receiving, interpreting, verifying, and responding to political information perceived as disinformation, as well as how these processes influence their trust in political institutions, political actors, media, and democratic mechanisms. McKay and Tenove (2021) argue that disinformation threatens deliberative democracy because it undermines the quality of reason-giving in public discourse. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich scholarship on political communication, digital democracy, political trust, and the digital public sphere by offering an experience-based understanding of how disinformation affects citizens' relationship with politics. Practically, the findings may provide insights for government institutions, election organizers, media organizations, civil society groups, and digital literacy educators in designing public communication strategies that are more transparent, participatory, and responsive to the crisis of political trust in the age of disinformation.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. This design is selected because the study focuses on citizens' subjective experiences in encountering digital disinformation and how such experiences shape their political trust. Phenomenology enables the researcher to explore the meanings constructed by participants when they read, receive, share, doubt, reject, or verify political information in the digital public sphere. Pjesivac and Little (2025) conceptualize misinformation and disinformation as phenomena that must be understood in relation to digital democracy and the public sphere. Therefore, a phenomenological design is appropriate because this study does not aim to statistically measure the magnitude of disinformation's influence; instead, it seeks to understand the processes of experience, interpretation, and trust formation among citizens.

The research is designed to be conducted in Indonesia, focusing on active social media users who have been exposed to political information during elections, policy debates, or viral national political issues. The research sites may include urban and semi-urban areas such as Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Makassar, or other cities with high social media use and active digital political discussion. The study may be conducted over three to four months, for example from May to August 2026, covering participant mapping, data collection, data validation, and thematic analysis. Bennett and Kneuer (2024) show that contemporary digital public spheres are

increasingly vulnerable to forms of communication that contribute to democratic erosion. Thus, selecting research sites with intensive digital political communication is relevant to the objectives of this study.

Participants will be selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria: Indonesian citizens aged at least 17 years, active users of social media, individuals who follow political issues online, and individuals willing to share their experiences of encountering political information whose truthfulness they questioned. Participants may include young voters, university students, workers, community activists, citizen journalists, digital community managers, digital literacy educators, and ordinary citizens involved in online political conversations. To expand the diversity of experiences, snowball sampling may also be used by asking initial participants to recommend other individuals with relevant experiences. Putra et al. (2025) show that young people's digital political culture is closely related to institutional trust deficits, making young voters an important participant group in this study. The number of participants may range from 15 to 25 individuals, or until data saturation is reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer produce substantially new themes.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of digital conversations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews will be used to explore participants' experiences regarding the political information sources they follow, the types of disinformation they have encountered, the reasons they trust or distrust certain information, and the perceived effects of these experiences on their views of government, electoral institutions, political parties, media, and public figures. Non-participant observation will be conducted by examining public posts, comments, hashtags, and political discussions on platforms such as X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, or publicly accessible digital communities. Siregar (2025) highlights the negative effects of political buzzers on citizens' communication intelligence in Indonesia, making observation of digital interaction patterns important for contextualizing participants' experiences. Documentation may include screenshots of public posts, online news archives, fact-checking reports, and policy documents related to the handling of digital disinformation.

Data validity will be maintained through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Source triangulation will be conducted by comparing information from participants with different social backgrounds, ages, occupations, and media preferences. Methodological triangulation will be carried out by connecting interview data, digital observation notes, and documentation so that interpretation does not rely on a single data source. Member checking will be conducted by confirming interview summaries or preliminary interpretations with selected participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation is consistent with participants' intended meanings. Nieminen (2024) emphasizes that the spread of disinformation is related to social conditions, inequality, and media quality, which means that validation must consider the broader social context shaping citizens' experiences. An audit trail will be maintained by systematically storing research notes, interview transcripts, analytical memos, coding decisions, and theme development records.

Data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis supported by the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the initial stage, interview transcripts and observation notes will be read repeatedly to identify meaning units related to exposure to disinformation, emotional responses, verification strategies, perceptions of political actors, and changes in political trust. During open coding, the researcher may generate codes such as "distrust of official sources," "trust in community figures," "information fatigue," "fear of manipulation," "political silence," and "cross-platform verification." D'Andrea et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of democratic policies and initiatives in countering digital disinformation, while this study positions citizens' lived experiences as the basis for understanding why such responses are necessary. Codes with similar meanings will then be grouped into broader themes, such as trust crisis, negotiation of truth,

information authority, identity polarization, and digital resilience strategies. The results will be presented as thematic narratives that integrate participants' quotations, descriptions of digital contexts, and theoretical interpretation based on the digital public sphere perspective.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings of this qualitative study indicate that digital disinformation affects political trust not through a single linear process, but through a gradual accumulation of uncertainty, emotional fatigue, social comparison, and changing perceptions of political actors and institutions. Based on interviews, digital observation, and documentation, five major themes emerged from the data analysis: uncertainty in assessing political information, declining trust in official political communication, reliance on interpersonal and community-based verification, emotional fatigue and political withdrawal, and the fragmented character of the digital public sphere. These themes show that political trust in Indonesia's digital environment is shaped not only by institutional performance, but also by citizens' everyday encounters with unstable, contested, and emotionally charged political information.

The first theme is uncertainty in assessing political information. Participants described that political information on social media often appeared in fragmented forms, such as short videos, edited clips, screenshots, anonymous claims, memes, and viral captions. This fragmentation made it difficult for participants to determine whether a political message was factual, misleading, satirical, or intentionally manipulative. One participant stated, "Sometimes I do not know whether the news is true or only created to attack one political side. The video looks real, but the caption can lead us to a different conclusion" (Participant 4, interview). This finding suggests that disinformation works not only by making citizens believe false information, but also by creating doubt toward almost all political information. In the Indonesian context, where political debates often circulate through WhatsApp groups, TikTok videos, Instagram reels, and X/Twitter threads, uncertainty becomes part of citizens' daily experience in the digital public sphere.

The second theme is the decline of trust in official political communication. Several participants reported that when government institutions or political actors responded slowly to viral issues, they became more likely to trust alternative narratives circulating on social media. For some participants, official clarification was perceived as defensive, formal, and emotionally distant from public concerns. One participant explained, "When the clarification comes too late, people already believe the first version. Even when the government explains, it sounds like they are only protecting themselves" (Participant 9, interview). This pattern shows that speed, tone, and credibility are crucial in digital political communication. The observation of public comment sections also showed that official statements were frequently met with suspicion, especially when they concerned elections, corruption issues, public policy controversies, or law enforcement. Thus, disinformation weakens political trust by occupying the gap between a viral issue and institutional response.

The third theme is reliance on interpersonal and community-based verification. Participants did not always depend on formal fact-checking institutions when verifying political information. Many of them compared information with trusted friends, family members, lecturers, religious figures, community leaders, or colleagues who were considered politically knowledgeable. One participant said, "I usually ask my friend who follows politics more seriously. I trust him more than accounts that suddenly appear on my timeline" (Participant 13, interview). This finding demonstrates that trust in the digital public sphere is relational. Citizens do not evaluate information only based on institutional authority, but also through social proximity and perceived moral credibility. In Indonesian society, where communal ties and interpersonal networks remain important, political information is often filtered through social relationships before it is accepted or rejected.

The fourth theme is emotional fatigue and political withdrawal. Participants described feeling tired, annoyed, or overwhelmed by the constant circulation of conflicting political claims. Some participants chose to reduce their engagement with political content, mute certain accounts, leave family chat groups temporarily, or avoid commenting on political issues. One participant noted, "I used to enjoy discussing politics online, but now I prefer to stay silent because every topic becomes a fight. It is tiring, and I do not know who to trust anymore" (Participant 2, interview). This finding indicates that disinformation does not always produce active polarization; it may also produce withdrawal from political discussion. In this sense, digital disinformation can weaken democratic participation indirectly by making citizens emotionally exhausted and reluctant to engage in public debate.

The fifth theme is the fragmented character of the digital public sphere. Digital observation showed that political conversations were often divided into separate interpretive communities. Participants tended to encounter political content aligned with their previous preferences, social networks, or algorithmic recommendations. As a result, the same political event could generate radically different interpretations depending on the digital community in which it circulated. One participant stated, "In my timeline, one candidate is seen as corrupt, but in my parents' WhatsApp group, the same candidate is described as a victim of slander" (Participant 17, interview). This illustrates how the digital public sphere does not always function as a shared deliberative space. Instead, it often becomes a collection of segmented arenas where political meaning is shaped by identity, emotion, algorithmic visibility, and group loyalty.

These findings show that the impact of digital disinformation on political trust operates through both cognitive and affective mechanisms. Cognitively, participants experienced difficulty identifying credible information, verifying political claims, and distinguishing between authentic and manipulated content. Affectively, participants experienced suspicion, disappointment, anger, fatigue, and distrust toward political actors and institutions. Documentation from public posts and fact-checking reports supported this pattern by showing that disinformation often circulated around emotionally sensitive issues, such as electoral fraud, corruption, religion, ethnicity, public policy, and elite conflict. Therefore, the findings suggest that political trust is not merely weakened by false information itself, but by the broader digital environment in which citizens repeatedly experience uncertainty, emotional pressure, and institutional doubt.

Discussion

The findings support the argument that digital disinformation should be understood as part of the structural transformation of the public sphere. Jungherr and Schroeder (2021) argue that disinformation is not simply a problem of false content, but a symptom of broader changes in the public arena, including the weakening of gatekeeping, the rise of platform-based visibility, and the fragmentation of public attention. The present study confirms this argument in the Indonesian context. Participants' experiences show that political trust is shaped by the structure of digital communication itself: speed, virality, algorithmic repetition, emotional framing, and the absence of shared interpretive authority. Thus, the digital public sphere does not merely transmit political information; it actively shapes how citizens evaluate credibility, authority, and legitimacy.

The finding on uncertainty in assessing political information is consistent with Chambers' (2021) argument that democratic deliberation requires a shared commitment to accuracy. When citizens cannot distinguish between factual information and manipulative narratives, the basis for rational public discussion becomes unstable. However, this study adds a qualitative perspective by showing that uncertainty is not only an epistemic problem but also an everyday emotional experience. Participants did not simply lack information; rather, they were surrounded by excessive, conflicting, and emotionally charged information. This condition created what may be called "interpretive exhaustion," where citizens still have access to information but lose confidence in their ability to judge its credibility.

The decline of trust in official political communication also aligns with Surjatmodjo et al. (2024), who describe disinformation as an information pandemic that may affect state resilience. In this study, participants' distrust was intensified when official institutions responded slowly, used overly formal language, or failed to address the emotional dimension of public concern. This suggests that institutional communication in the digital era requires more than factual correction. It must also demonstrate transparency, empathy, responsiveness, and consistency. When official communication is perceived as distant or defensive, citizens may turn to alternative narratives, even when those narratives are less reliable. This finding is especially relevant for Indonesia, where public trust is often negotiated through both formal authority and informal social credibility.

The reliance on interpersonal and community-based verification offers a nuanced contribution to the literature on digital literacy. Studies on digital citizenship emphasize the importance of citizens' capacity to evaluate information critically. Yanuartha and Hergianasari (2025) argue that educational technology and digital citizenship are important for strengthening democracy in Indonesia. This study extends that discussion by showing that verification is not always an individual cognitive act; it is often a social practice embedded in networks of trust. Participants frequently relied on friends, family members, lecturers, religious leaders, or community figures to interpret political information. Therefore, digital literacy programs should not only teach individual fact-checking skills but also strengthen community-based information resilience.

The finding on emotional fatigue and political withdrawal provides a critical perspective on the democratic consequences of disinformation. McKay and Tenove (2021) argue that disinformation threatens deliberative democracy because it undermines the quality of reasoning in public discourse. This study shows that the threat is not limited to the circulation of false arguments; it also includes citizens' withdrawal from political discussion. When citizens feel that all political conversations are hostile, manipulative, or impossible to verify, they may choose silence as a coping mechanism. Such withdrawal can reduce the diversity of voices in the public sphere and allow more aggressive or manipulative actors to dominate political conversations.

The fragmented character of the digital public sphere confirms Trenz's (2023) view that digital democracy can be both disruptive and self-corrective. On one hand, participants used social media to access alternative perspectives, compare claims, and challenge official narratives. On the other hand, they also experienced algorithmic segmentation and identity-based polarization. In this sense, Indonesia's digital public sphere cannot be understood as a single unified space. It is better understood as a set of overlapping but unequal communicative arenas, where different groups construct different political realities. This finding is consistent with Kulsum et al. (2025), who show that digital mobilization and misinformation in Indonesia are increasingly mediated by affective and algorithmic dynamics.

Compared with previous Indonesian studies, this research offers a more experience-centered interpretation of political trust. Putra et al. (2025) emphasize the relationship between digital political culture and institutional trust deficits among Generation Z. The present study supports that finding but expands it beyond generational identity by showing that distrust emerges across different participant groups through repeated exposure to contested digital narratives. Siregar (2025) highlights the negative role of political buzzers in weakening public communication intelligence. This study complements that argument by showing how citizens experience buzzer-like communication not only as manipulation, but also as noise that makes political discussion emotionally exhausting and morally uncertain.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the study of political trust by showing that trust is not only an attitude toward institutions but also a mediated experience shaped through digital interaction. Political trust is produced, challenged, and renegotiated through citizens' encounters with viral content, community interpretation, institutional responses, and platform algorithms. From the perspective of the digital public sphere, trust should therefore be understood as

relational, affective, and communicative. This perspective helps explain why fact-checking alone may not fully restore trust. Citizens may accept that a particular claim is false, but still remain suspicious of institutions if they perceive broader patterns of opacity, manipulation, or unequal communication.

Practically, the findings imply that responses to digital disinformation in Indonesia should combine institutional transparency, rapid clarification, participatory communication, and community-based digital literacy. Government institutions and election organizers need to communicate in ways that are timely, evidence-based, and understandable to citizens. Media organizations and fact-checkers need to collaborate with community actors who already possess interpersonal trust within local networks. Educational institutions should integrate digital citizenship, political literacy, and ethical communication into civic education. Civil society organizations can also play a role by creating safe spaces for cross-group dialogue, especially in polarized political contexts.

Future research may deepen this study by comparing citizens' experiences across regions, generations, religious communities, and political affiliations. Further studies may also examine platform-specific differences, such as how TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, X/Twitter, and YouTube shape different patterns of disinformation exposure and political trust. Longitudinal qualitative research would be useful to understand how political trust changes before, during, and after elections. In addition, future research may combine interviews with digital ethnography or computational analysis to connect citizens' lived experiences with broader patterns of platform circulation. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital disinformation reshapes democratic life in Indonesia.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that digital disinformation affects political trust in Indonesia through a gradual process of uncertainty, suspicion, emotional fatigue, and fragmented political interpretation within the digital public sphere. The main findings show that citizens experience difficulty assessing political information, distrust official political communication when institutional responses are slow or defensive, rely on interpersonal networks for verification, and often withdraw from political discussion due to exhaustion. These findings contribute to the existing literature by showing that political trust is not merely an institutional attitude, but a mediated and relational experience shaped by citizens' daily encounters with viral content, community interpretation, platform algorithms, and contested political narratives.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the digital public sphere perspective by demonstrating that disinformation disrupts democratic deliberation not only by spreading false information but also by weakening citizens' confidence in their ability to judge political truth. Practically, the findings imply the need for more transparent, responsive, and participatory political communication from public institutions, as well as stronger community-based digital literacy initiatives. From a policy perspective, efforts to address disinformation should combine rapid clarification, ethical platform governance, public education, and collaboration with trusted community actors. Future studies may expand this research by comparing different regions, generations, political affiliations, or social media platforms, and by combining qualitative inquiry with digital ethnography or computational analysis to capture broader patterns of disinformation circulation and political trust.

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