



The Dynamics of Public Trust in Political Institutions in the Age of Disinformation Among Social Media Users in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the dynamics of public trust in political institutions in the age of disinformation among social media users in Indonesia. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study explores how users experience, interpret, verify, and respond to political information circulating across digital platforms. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, limited digital observation, and documentation involving active social media users aged 18 years and above in several urban contexts in Indonesia. Thematic analysis revealed four major findings: selective trust toward political institutions, reliance on interpersonal verification networks, emotional fatigue caused by repeated exposure to disinformation, and conditional trust recovery through transparent and responsive institutional communication. The findings show that public trust is not static, but negotiated through the interaction between institutional credibility, digital platform culture, peer influence, and users' emotional experiences. This study contributes to the literature on institutional trust and digital democracy by emphasizing the concept of negotiated institutional trust in contexts shaped by disinformation. The findings imply that political institutions should strengthen timely, evidence-based, and dialogic communication, while digital literacy programs should address not only factual verification but also emotional and civic dimensions of online political engagement. Further research is recommended to compare trust dynamics across regions, generations, and political communities in Indonesia.



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1. Introduction

Disinformation has become one of the most serious challenges to contemporary digital democracy because political information is no longer mediated only by journalism, political parties, or formal state institutions. It now circulates through social media networks that are rapid, personalized, emotional, and often difficult to verify. Globally, disinformation is not merely the spread of inaccurate information; it is also a strategic communicative practice that produces doubt, deepens polarization, and weakens the legitimacy of public institutions. A qualitative study on

disinformation regulation in Portugal shows that public trust, digital literacy, and regulatory capacity are central to understanding how citizens evaluate political authority in an environment saturated with competing claims (Guedes et al., 2025). In a similar direction, research on how people navigate numerical disinformation on personal messaging platforms demonstrates that users often assess credibility not only through factual accuracy, but also through interpersonal trust, perceived social closeness, and the reputation of the person sharing the information (Lawson et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, the issue of political disinformation is particularly significant because social media has become deeply embedded in civic participation, electoral campaigning, public criticism, and everyday discussions about government policy. Studies on digital democracy in Indonesia indicate that social media expands opportunities for political participation, yet simultaneously enables opinion manipulation, hoax circulation, smear campaigns, and distrust toward political institutions (Wahidin et al., 2025). A critical review of disinformation and state resilience further argues that misleading content on social media can threaten democratic stability because citizens increasingly struggle to distinguish legitimate political criticism from propaganda and deliberately fabricated information (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). In this context, public trust in political institutions cannot be understood merely as a rational evaluation of institutional performance; it must also be examined as a social experience shaped by digital narratives, collective emotions, algorithmic exposure, and interactions among users.

Empirical conditions in the field suggest that social media users often experience ambivalence when encountering political information. On the one hand, they use digital platforms to obtain rapid updates, compare opinions, express criticism, and participate in political conversations. On the other hand, they also face information fatigue, suspicion toward official sources, and a tendency to rely on narratives shared within their trusted online communities. A study on citizens' lived experiences of trust in government communication amid digital disinformation found that trust is shaped not only by the content of official messages, but also by consistency, institutional reputation, perceived transparency, and citizens' previous experiences with public communication (Sumarna & Palupi, 2025). Research on Generation Z's digital political culture in Indonesia similarly shows that hoaxes, disinformation, and smear campaigns on social media contribute to an institutional trust deficit, especially when political institutions are perceived as slow, unresponsive, or disconnected from citizens' concerns (Putra et al., 2025).

This issue is important to study because disinformation affects not only what citizens know, but also how they feel, interpret, and relate to political institutions. From a social perspective, disinformation can weaken civic cohesion by transforming political disagreement into suspicion, hostility, and symbolic conflict between groups. From a cultural perspective, social media users are not passive recipients of political information; they actively produce, filter, reinterpret, and redistribute narratives that they consider meaningful or credible. A study on citizens' roles in countering disinformation and hate speech highlights that public responses to misleading content depend on digital literacy, community norms, and users' willingness to correct problematic information in online spaces (Zahirah, 2025). In addition, research on the crisis of public trust in Indonesian public institutions in the era of digital disinformation shows that distrust often emerges from accumulated experiences in which citizens perceive a gap between institutional communication and social realities encountered in everyday life (Suriadi, 2025).

Although scholarship on disinformation, social media, and public trust in Indonesia has expanded, several limitations remain. Many studies still frame disinformation mainly as a problem of content circulation, platform regulation, electoral manipulation, or general public opinion. Research on digital platform liability in electoral disinformation, for example, focuses primarily on legal comparison between Indonesia and the European Union (Sudira et al., 2025). Other studies on political propaganda during the 2024 Indonesian election emphasize the threat of post-truth scenarios and narrative battles in digital spaces (Kurniawan, 2025). What remains insufficiently explored is how social media users interpret their own experiences when trust in

political institutions is disrupted, negotiated, weakened, or restored after exposure to political disinformation. This gap makes a qualitative approach especially relevant, as qualitative inquiry enables researchers to examine meaning, lived experience, interpretive processes, and social relations that cannot be fully captured through numerical measurement.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the dynamics of public trust in political institutions in the age of disinformation among social media users in Indonesia. The study focuses on users' experiences in receiving, interpreting, verifying, discussing, and responding to political information circulating across social media platforms, as well as how these experiences shape their perceptions of institutions such as the government, parliament, political parties, election organizers, and state agencies. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of institutional trust scholarship in the context of digital democracy by positioning disinformation as a socially interpreted experience rather than merely an informational disturbance. Practically, the findings are expected to inform political institutions, public communication officers, digital literacy educators, civil society organizations, and platform governance actors in developing more transparent, responsive, and trust-oriented communication strategies. A phenomenological study on the emotional impact of disinformation indicates that misleading political content affects not only knowledge and belief, but also anxiety, anger, cynicism, and citizens' willingness to participate in public discussion (Asman, 2025).

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design. This design is selected because the primary objective of the research is not to measure the level of public trust statistically, but to understand the lived experiences of social media users when encountering political disinformation and interpreting political institutions through those experiences. Phenomenology enables the researcher to explore subjective meanings, perceptions, emotions, reflections, and interpretive processes that emerge when users evaluate political information in digital spaces. This methodological choice is consistent with qualitative research on disinformation that uses in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to understand meaning-making processes rather than merely measuring exposure frequency (Taxitari et al., 2025).

The research will be conducted in Indonesia, with the primary field consisting of digital social media spaces and interviews with active users in several major cities, including Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar. These locations are selected to represent diverse social backgrounds, high levels of social media use, and relatively active digital political conversations in urban contexts. The study is planned to take place from February to April 2026, covering issue mapping, participant recruitment, interviews, digital observation, document collection, data organization, and analysis. The research subjects are social media users aged 18 years and above who actively access, share, or discuss political information through platforms such as X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Research on social media and digital governance suggests that cross-platform experience is important because each platform has different interaction patterns, circulation speeds, audience structures, and credibility cues (Jamaluddin et al., 2025).

Participants will be selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria: they must have used social media actively for at least three years, have encountered political information whose accuracy they later questioned, have participated in online political discussions or debates, and be willing to reflect on their personal experiences. To expand the diversity of experiences, snowball sampling will also be applied by asking initial participants to recommend other users who have relevant experiences, such as being exposed to political hoaxes, unintentionally sharing misleading content, correcting false political claims, or withdrawing from political discussions due to distrust. The estimated number of participants is 20 to 30, although the final number will be determined by data saturation, namely the point at which additional interviews no longer generate substantially new themes. This sampling strategy is appropriate for qualitative studies of

misinformation because it prioritizes variation in experience, social background, platform use, and trust orientation (Mishra et al., 2024).

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, limited digital participant observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews will be used to explore participants' experiences with political disinformation, their reasons for trusting or rejecting certain information, their verification strategies, their interactions with other users, and any changes in their perceptions of political institutions after exposure to disinformation. Limited digital observation will be conducted by examining public conversations on social media related to political issues, without entering private spaces or closed groups without consent. Documentation will include public posts, screenshots of relevant public discussions, fact-checking archives, official institutional statements, and digital traces related to the research topic. Research on AI-based disinformation and hate speech amplification in Indonesia's digital media ecosystem indicates that digital documentation is important for understanding the form, pattern, and context of misleading content circulation (Sonni, 2025).

Data validity will be ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Source triangulation will be conducted by comparing accounts from participants with different ages, educational backgrounds, cities of residence, and preferred platforms. Method triangulation will be carried out by comparing interview data, digital observation notes, and supporting documents. Member checking will be conducted by sharing summaries of interview interpretations or preliminary findings with selected participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation does not misrepresent their experiences. An audit trail will be maintained by systematically storing research notes, interview guides, analytic memos, coding decisions, and revisions of thematic categories. This validation process is essential because research on trust in digital political spaces is vulnerable to interpretive bias, especially when dealing with emotionally charged and polarized political opinions. A qualitative study on how the public navigates misinformation on social media demonstrates that validation is necessary because users' experiences are often complex, ambiguous, and shaped by interpersonal trust (Sathianathan et al., 2025).

The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of data familiarization, initial coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation. In the first stage, interview transcripts and observation notes will be read repeatedly to obtain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. The researcher will then conduct open coding by identifying meaningful statements, such as "distrust of official sources," "trust in close friends," "fatigue with political debate," "verification through mainstream media," or "cynicism toward political institutions." These codes will then be grouped into broader categories, such as sources of trust, verification practices, political emotions, disinformation encounters, and meanings of institutional credibility. Final themes will be developed interpretively by examining relationships among categories, participants' social contexts, and relevant theories of institutional trust. This analytical strategy aligns with qualitative research on fake news that uses in-depth interviews to understand users' motivations, responses, and meaning construction when encountering false information (Kaur et al., 2025).

Ethically, this study will protect participants' identities by using pseudonyms, removing personal identifiers, and storing research data in secure digital files. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, the form of their participation, possible risks, confidentiality measures, their right to refuse questions, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. For social media data, the study will use only public posts or data for which consent has been obtained. The researcher will avoid reproducing disinformation content in full so as not to amplify misleading narratives. In reporting the findings, interview excerpts will be used selectively to illustrate experiential patterns rather than to judge participants' political preferences. Research on social media users' resilience to disinformation emphasizes that studies on this topic must

consider digital safety, political sensitivity, and the diverse social positions of users as meaning-making subjects (Bieliková & Macková, 2025).

3. Results and Discussions

The findings of this qualitative study indicate that public trust in political institutions among social media users in Indonesia is not a fixed attitude, but a dynamic process that is continuously negotiated through everyday encounters with political information. From the interviews, observations of public social media conversations, and digital documentation, four major themes emerged: selective trust toward political institutions, interpersonal verification practices, emotional fatigue caused by disinformation, and conditional trust recovery through transparent communication. These themes show that social media users do not simply believe or reject political information based on institutional authority. Instead, they interpret information through personal experience, peer networks, platform culture, and perceptions of whether institutions communicate honestly and consistently. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that digital disinformation affects trust not only through false content, but also through uncertainty, emotional pressure, and the weakening of confidence in official communication (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024).

The first theme is selective trust toward political institutions. Participants generally did not express total distrust toward all political institutions, but they differentiated between institutions, actors, and communication practices. Government agencies were sometimes considered credible when providing technical or administrative information, yet viewed with suspicion when communicating politically sensitive issues. Election organizers, political parties, parliament, and law enforcement institutions were often evaluated through previous experiences, media exposure, and perceived neutrality. One participant stated, “I do not reject all official information, but when the issue is political, I always ask whose interest is behind it.” This statement illustrates that trust is shaped not only by institutional status but also by perceived political interest. Research on citizens’ lived experiences of trust in government communication similarly found that public trust depends on consistency, responsiveness, and citizens’ interpretation of institutional motives (Sumarna & Palupi, 2025).

The second theme concerns interpersonal verification practices. Participants often relied on informal networks, such as friends, family groups, colleagues, online communities, and trusted influencers, before accepting or rejecting political information. Rather than immediately checking official sources, many participants first compared information with what was circulating in WhatsApp groups, X/Twitter discussions, TikTok comments, or Instagram stories. One participant explained, “Usually I wait until people I trust start discussing it. If only one account posts it, I do not immediately believe it.” This finding indicates that verification in digital political culture is not purely individual or technical; it is socially embedded. Users tend to treat credibility as something negotiated collectively through repeated interaction. This supports the argument that trust in digital spaces is often mediated by peer relationships and perceived social closeness rather than by institutional authority alone (Lawson et al., 2025).

The third theme is emotional fatigue caused by disinformation. Participants described repeated exposure to political hoaxes, conflicting narratives, and hostile online debates as producing confusion, anger, anxiety, and eventually withdrawal from political discussion. Some participants admitted that they no longer wished to discuss politics online because every issue quickly became polarized. One participant said, “Sometimes I feel tired because every political issue becomes a fight. In the end, I just read silently and do not comment anymore.” This pattern shows that disinformation does not only distort knowledge; it also affects emotional participation in democratic life. Emotional fatigue can reduce willingness to engage in public discussion, even among users who remain interested in politics. This finding is aligned with research showing that disinformation can generate anxiety, cynicism, and disengagement among social media users (Asman, 2025).

The fourth theme is conditional trust recovery through transparent and responsive communication. Participants indicated that trust could be restored when political institutions communicated quickly, provided evidence, acknowledged mistakes, and responded to public confusion in accessible language. Institutional communication was considered more credible when it included supporting documents, clear timelines, visual explanations, and opportunities for public clarification. One participant noted, “If an institution explains clearly, admits what is wrong, and shows the data, I can still trust it. What makes people suspicious is when they are silent or defensive.” This finding suggests that distrust is not always permanent. It can be reduced when institutions treat citizens not merely as passive recipients of information, but as active publics who require explanation and accountability. Research on public trust and government policy communication in Indonesia similarly emphasizes that social media can strengthen trust when used for transparent, interactive, and responsive communication (Tarore et al., 2025).

Observation of social media conversations also revealed that public trust is shaped by the interaction between platform characteristics and political culture. On fast-moving platforms such as X/Twitter and TikTok, political information was often framed through short videos, screenshots, emotional captions, satire, and viral hashtags. These formats made political issues easier to circulate but also more vulnerable to simplification and manipulation. In WhatsApp groups, information often gained credibility because it was shared by people with close social ties, even when the content lacked verifiable sources. In Instagram and YouTube, longer explanations sometimes helped users understand political issues, but comment sections frequently became spaces of suspicion and ideological conflict. This finding strengthens previous research on Indonesian digital politics, which shows that social media functions simultaneously as a site of participation, mobilization, misinformation, and public opinion formation (Jamaluddin et al., 2025).

Documentation from public posts, fact-checking archives, and institutional statements further indicates that disinformation tends to become more influential when official clarification appears late, overly technical, or disconnected from the emotional tone of public debate. In several observed cases, users had already formed judgments before official explanations circulated widely. This shows that the timing and style of institutional communication matter as much as the factual accuracy of the message. When institutions communicate in bureaucratic language while disinformation spreads through emotionally engaging narratives, users may perceive official clarification as less persuasive. This finding is consistent with studies on political communication in Indonesia showing that disinformation campaigns often exploit emotional framing, identity-based narratives, and distrust toward elites (Subekti et al., 2025).

Overall, the results suggest that the dynamics of public trust in political institutions in the age of disinformation can be understood as a cyclical process. Users encounter political information, interpret it through personal and social frames, verify it through peer networks or alternative sources, respond emotionally, and then revise their level of trust toward institutions. This process is not linear because users may trust one institution in one context but distrust it in another. A participant captured this complexity by stating, “I still believe some institutions, but not automatically. Now everything depends on the issue, the evidence, and how they explain it.” This statement reflects the central meaning found in the data: trust in the digital era is conditional, contextual, and continuously renegotiated. Similar tendencies have been identified in studies of institutional trust deficits among young voters and digital citizens in Indonesia (Putra et al., 2025).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that public trust in political institutions in the age of disinformation should be understood as an interpretive and relational phenomenon. Trust does not emerge solely from formal legitimacy, legal authority, or institutional position. It is constructed through citizens’ experiences of receiving information, observing institutional behavior, interacting with others, and interpreting political narratives in digital spaces. This supports institutional trust theory,

which views trust as a combination of perceived competence, integrity, benevolence, and predictability. In the context of social media, however, these dimensions are filtered through platform logics, emotional discourse, and interpersonal networks. The findings therefore extend existing theory by showing that institutional trust in digital environments is not only a judgment about institutions, but also a judgment about the communication ecosystem in which institutions operate.

The theme of selective trust confirms that citizens do not simply become irrational or anti-institutional when exposed to disinformation. Instead, they develop conditional criteria for trusting political institutions. Participants distinguished between technical information and politically sensitive communication, between institutional data and partisan framing, and between transparent explanation and defensive denial. This finding aligns with research on digital disinformation and state resilience, which argues that misleading information can weaken trust when institutions fail to provide credible and timely communication (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). However, the present study adds a more nuanced perspective by showing that distrust is not always generalized. Users may distrust political parties but still trust election procedures, or distrust political figures while still valuing institutional clarification when it is supported by evidence.

The finding on interpersonal verification practices also contributes to the literature on digital trust. Previous research has shown that peer networks and personal messaging platforms play an important role in shaping how users evaluate disinformation (Lawson et al., 2025). This study supports that argument in the Indonesian context, particularly by showing how family groups, friendship circles, influencers, and online communities function as informal credibility filters. Yet this pattern creates a paradox. On the one hand, interpersonal verification can help users avoid immediately believing viral political claims. On the other hand, it can also reinforce echo chambers when trusted networks share similar ideological positions. This explains why disinformation may persist even among users who claim to be cautious: verification is practiced socially, but the social environment itself may already be politically biased.

The emotional fatigue experienced by participants offers another important perspective. Much of the public debate on disinformation focuses on factual correction, platform regulation, or media literacy. While these are important, the findings show that disinformation also produces affective consequences, including frustration, anxiety, cynicism, and withdrawal from discussion. This is consistent with studies indicating that disinformation can affect users' emotional well-being and willingness to participate in public life (Asman, 2025). Theoretically, this suggests that public trust should not be treated only as a cognitive evaluation. Trust is also emotional because it involves feelings of safety, confidence, recognition, and being respected by institutions. When political communication becomes hostile or manipulative, citizens may disengage not because they are apathetic, but because participation becomes emotionally costly.

The findings also show that social media platforms shape the conditions under which trust is formed or weakened. Short-form video, viral hashtags, screenshots, memes, and emotionally charged captions often make political information more accessible but less contextual. This supports studies on Indonesia's digital political culture showing that social media can expand participation while also intensifying hoaxes, smear campaigns, and institutional trust deficits (Putra et al., 2025). At the same time, the findings differ from views that frame social media only as a destructive space. Participants also used social media to compare sources, access fact-checking content, follow institutional clarifications, and observe public debate. Thus, the role of social media is ambivalent: it can accelerate disinformation, but it can also provide tools for verification and accountability.

The theme of conditional trust recovery has significant practical implications. Participants did not demand perfect institutions, but they expected clarity, consistency, evidence, and accountability. This finding is important because it suggests that public trust can be repaired when

institutions communicate in ways that acknowledge citizens' uncertainty. Studies on public trust in government communication emphasize that responsiveness and transparency are central to maintaining credibility in digital environments (Tarore et al., 2025). The present study strengthens this argument by showing that the style of communication matters: overly bureaucratic responses may fail to compete with emotionally compelling disinformation. Institutions therefore need to develop communication strategies that are factual, timely, dialogic, and understandable to ordinary users.

Compared with previous research on disinformation regulation and platform responsibility, this study places greater emphasis on users' lived experiences. Legal and regulatory studies highlight the importance of platform accountability, state capacity, and policy frameworks in combating information disorder (Nasution, 2025). Those approaches are necessary, but they do not fully explain how citizens experience confusion, distrust, or emotional fatigue in daily social media use. By focusing on users' meanings and narratives, this study offers a complementary perspective: the crisis of trust is not only institutional or technological, but also experiential. Citizens evaluate political institutions through accumulated encounters with information, contradiction, clarification, silence, and public debate.

The findings also contribute to discussions on digital citizenship. Research on digital citizenship and disinformation in Indonesia argues that education and digital literacy are essential to strengthening democracy (Yanuartha & Hergianasari, 2025). This study supports that claim but suggests that literacy should not be limited to identifying hoaxes or checking sources. Digital citizenship also requires emotional literacy, dialogic skills, awareness of algorithmic influence, and the ability to evaluate institutional communication critically without falling into total cynicism. In other words, strengthening public trust requires both competent citizens and trustworthy institutions. Literacy programs will have limited impact if institutions continue to communicate defensively, inconsistently, or without public accountability.

Theoretically, the study offers a concept that may be described as negotiated institutional trust. This concept refers to the process through which citizens continuously revise their trust in political institutions based on digital encounters, social verification, emotional responses, and perceived institutional accountability. Negotiated institutional trust differs from stable trust because it is situational and issue-based. It also differs from distrust because it does not imply complete rejection of institutions. Instead, it reflects a cautious mode of citizenship in which users remain engaged but no longer grant automatic credibility to political actors. This concept may help future research understand why citizens can be critical of institutions while still expecting those institutions to provide reliable information.

Practically, the study implies that political institutions in Indonesia need to move beyond one-way public communication. Institutions should strengthen rapid response mechanisms, collaborate with independent fact-checkers, present information in accessible formats, and engage citizens through interactive clarification channels. Public communication should also address the emotional dimension of disinformation by acknowledging confusion, fear, anger, or suspicion rather than merely correcting facts. Civil society organizations and educators can use these findings to design digital literacy programs that combine fact-checking skills with reflective discussion about trust, bias, political identity, and responsible sharing practices. Platform managers should also consider how algorithmic amplification of provocative political content contributes to distrust and polarization.

Future research can deepen this topic in several ways. First, comparative studies could examine differences between regions, age groups, educational backgrounds, or political affiliations in the formation of trust amid disinformation. Second, longitudinal research could explore how trust changes before, during, and after major political events such as elections, protests, or policy crises. Third, mixed-methods research could combine qualitative interviews with social network analysis to examine how interpersonal trust and platform structure jointly

shape political interpretation. Finally, future studies could focus on marginalized communities whose experiences of political disinformation may differ from urban and digitally active users. Such research would broaden understanding of how public trust is negotiated across Indonesia's diverse social and cultural contexts.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that public trust in political institutions among Indonesian social media users is dynamic, conditional, and continuously negotiated through encounters with political disinformation. The main findings show that users develop selective trust toward political institutions, rely on interpersonal networks for verification, experience emotional fatigue due to repeated exposure to conflicting political narratives, and may restore trust when institutions communicate transparently, responsively, and with adequate evidence. These findings contribute to the literature on institutional trust and digital democracy by showing that trust in the age of disinformation is not merely determined by institutional authority or factual correction, but also by lived experience, social interaction, emotional response, and perceived accountability.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the understanding of “negotiated institutional trust” as a process in which citizens continuously evaluate political institutions through digital information flows and social verification practices. Practically, the findings suggest that political institutions need to move beyond one-way communication by providing timely clarification, accessible explanations, dialogic engagement, and collaboration with credible fact-checking actors. From a policy perspective, the study highlights the importance of digital literacy initiatives that combine technical fact-checking skills with critical, emotional, and civic literacy. Future research may expand this topic through comparative studies across regions, age groups, and political communities, or through longitudinal designs that examine how public trust changes before, during, and after major political events.

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