



The Relationship Between Digital Disinformation and Political Trust from the Perspective of the Digital Public Sphere in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between digital disinformation and political trust from the perspective of the digital public sphere in Indonesia. The issue is important because political communication increasingly takes place on social media, where citizens encounter political claims, hoaxes, partisan narratives, and fact-checking responses in the same digital environment. This study uses a qualitative case study approach conducted in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar from June to August 2025. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 informants, digital observation of public political discussions on TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp-based communities, and documentation of fact-checking articles, news reports, public posts, and official clarifications. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo 14. The findings reveal four main themes: perceived disinformation as political noise, trust negotiation through source evaluation, emotional responses and political identity, and the weakening of deliberation in the digital public sphere. The study shows that disinformation does not only distort facts, but also shapes how citizens interpret political actors, institutions, media, and democratic processes. The study concludes that political trust in Indonesia's digital public sphere is selective, conditional, and strongly influenced by the quality of public communication, digital literacy, and platform dynamics. Future research should examine platform-specific patterns and compare citizens' experiences across different social and regional contexts.



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1. Introduction

The growth of the digital public sphere has changed how Indonesian citizens receive political information, discuss public issues, and evaluate political institutions. Social media platforms now function as spaces for political expression, civic debate, campaign communication, and public criticism. At the same time, these platforms allow political disinformation to circulate quickly through short videos, edited images, anonymous accounts, partisan narratives, and closed messaging groups. Freelon and Wells (2020) explain that disinformation has become part of

contemporary political communication because it is produced, distributed, and consumed within digital media systems. Hameleers et al. (2020) also show that visual and multimodal disinformation can shape citizens' perceptions more strongly because it combines political claims with emotional cues. From the perspective of the digital public sphere, disinformation does not only distort facts. It also reshapes the conditions under which citizens form opinions, trust institutions, and participate in democratic life.

In Indonesia, this issue has become more urgent because political communication increasingly depends on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. During elections, policy controversies, public protests, and institutional crises, digital platforms often become the first space where citizens encounter political claims. Juditha (2024) shows that political communication during the 2024 Indonesian presidential election was strongly affected by hoax narratives and competing claims across digital media. Sarjito (2024) argues that hoaxes and disinformation in Indonesia can weaken social resilience because they create public suspicion, political tension, and distrust toward government institutions. Lee (2020) also notes that online hoaxes in Indonesia may intensify public anxiety when they are linked to political threat, identity conflict, or state legitimacy. This condition shows that Indonesia's digital public sphere creates new opportunities for democratic participation, but it also exposes citizens to manipulation and uncertainty.

User behavior plays an important role in the circulation of political disinformation. Effendi (2023) found that hoax information in Indonesia spreads quickly because users often respond to sensational headlines, emotional narratives, and information that confirms their previous beliefs. Hasan (2024) explains that social media became a contested political public space during the 2024 election because citizens, political actors, and digital communities used the same platforms to construct political meanings. Subekti (2025) further shows that candidate-related disinformation can influence how voters evaluate political actors in digital campaign environments. These findings indicate that disinformation is not only produced by organized actors. It also moves through everyday sharing practices, weak verification habits, and affective engagement among ordinary users.

Political trust is central to this study because trust affects how citizens view state legitimacy, public policy, electoral fairness, and democratic representation. Ognyanova et al. (2020) show that exposure to misinformation can reduce trust in media and alter citizens' trust in government depending on political alignment. Bauer and Clemm von Hohenberg (2021) explain that people may believe and share false information when it comes from sources that appear credible or ideologically close to them. Buchanan (2021) argues that trust, personality, and belief influence whether people share political disinformation on social media. In Indonesia, this issue becomes more complex because citizens interpret political information through personal experience, community networks, religious identity, ideological identity, and previous encounters with public institutions.

Previous research has discussed political hoaxes, fact-checking practices, digital literacy, platform regulation, and online political participation in Indonesia. Arum (2024) highlights the role of information-sharing behavior in the spread of political hoaxes during the 2024 election. Hutajulu (2023) discusses how social media and institutional trust shape digital participation in Indonesia. Sakti (2022) explains that social media can influence public satisfaction with government performance. However, these studies still leave an empirical gap. Many studies focus on the spread, verification, or impact of disinformation, but fewer studies examine how citizens experience disinformation as part of everyday political communication and how that experience shapes political trust within the digital public sphere.

This study aims to analyze the relationship between digital disinformation and political trust from the perspective of the digital public sphere in Indonesia. The study focuses on how Indonesian citizens recognize, interpret, respond to, and share political information that they

perceive as misleading. Lee (2024) argues that the relationship between disinformation perception and media trust depends on political trust and value orientation. Lukavská et al. (2025) also show that exposure, trust, and sharing behavior interact in complex ways when people encounter disinformation. Therefore, this study contributes to digital public sphere scholarship by explaining how disinformation affects political deliberation and institutional legitimacy. Practically, the study offers insights for digital literacy programs, public communication strategies, fact-checking initiatives, and platform governance that support democratic participation while protecting citizens from manipulative political information.

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. This design is suitable because the study seeks to understand meanings, experiences, and social processes rather than measure statistical effects. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that qualitative inquiry is useful for interpreting how people construct meaning from lived experience and social interaction. The case study focuses on the relationship between digital disinformation and political trust in Indonesia's digital public sphere after the 2024 general election. This period was selected because political conversations, election-related narratives, government criticism, and public debates continued to circulate across digital platforms after the election.

The research will be conducted in Indonesia from June to August 2025. The main research sites are Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Makassar. These cities were selected because they represent active urban digital communities, diverse political discussions, and different patterns of civic participation. Hafel (2023) explains that digital transformation in Indonesian politics and governance creates new opportunities for participation while also producing challenges related to cybersecurity, privacy, and digital inequality. The digital field includes public conversations on TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp-based community discussions. These platforms were selected because they are widely used for political communication, public debate, and the circulation of political claims.

The participants consist of 30 informants. They include young voters, adult voters, community activists, journalists, fact-checkers, political communication observers, and administrators of digital community accounts. Participants are selected through purposive sampling because the study requires informants who have direct experience with political content and disinformation in digital spaces. Naeem et al. (2023) explain that purposive selection is useful in qualitative research when researchers need participants who can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon under study. The criteria are: Indonesian citizens aged 17 years or older, active users of at least two social media platforms, exposed to political content during and after the 2024 election, and willing to discuss their experience with political disinformation. Snowball sampling is also used to identify additional informants, especially fact-checkers, community account administrators, and citizens who have participated in online clarification or anti-hoax discussions.

Data are collected through semi-structured interviews, digital observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with all 30 informants. Each interview lasts around 45 to 60 minutes and explores informants' experiences in identifying political disinformation, evaluating sources, responding to misleading content, and forming trust or distrust toward political institutions. Kiger and Varpio (2020) explain that qualitative interviews are effective for exploring participants' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations in relation to a specific social phenomenon. Digital observation is conducted on public political discussions across TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, and YouTube. Documentation includes fact-checking articles, public social media posts, official government clarifications, news reports, and digital campaign materials related to political disinformation.

Data validation is conducted through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and audit trail. Source triangulation compares information from voters, journalists, fact-checkers, activists, and digital community administrators. Method triangulation compares interview data, digital observation notes, and documents. Luthfia et al. (2025) show that the study of disinformation in Indonesia requires attention to multiple stakeholders, including journalists, media organizations, fact-checking platforms, NGOs, and digital communities. Member checking is conducted by sending interview summaries to selected participants to confirm whether the researcher's interpretation reflects their intended meaning. An audit trail is maintained by documenting interview guides, field notes, coding decisions, analytic memos, and theme development.

Data are analyzed using thematic analysis based on the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The analysis begins with data condensation through transcription, reading, and open coding. Initial codes include perceived disinformation, source credibility, distrust toward political actors, media skepticism, emotional reaction, verification behavior, political identity, and platform influence. Naeem et al. (2023) state that thematic analysis helps researchers develop conceptual patterns from qualitative data through systematic coding and theme construction. The next stage connects these codes into broader categories such as disinformation exposure, digital interpretation, trust negotiation, and public sphere distortion. The final themes explain how digital disinformation shapes political trust in Indonesia's digital public sphere. NVivo 14 is used to organize interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents.

3. Results and Discussions

The analysis of interview data, digital observation, and documentation produced four main themes: perceived disinformation as political noise, trust negotiation through source evaluation, emotional responses and political identity, and the weakening of deliberation in the digital public sphere. These themes show that digital disinformation does not only appear as false content. It also becomes part of citizens' daily political experience. Participants described disinformation as a confusing flow of claims, counterclaims, edited videos, anonymous posts, and partisan interpretations that often made political information difficult to trust.

The first theme is **perceived disinformation as political noise**. Most participants stated that they encountered misleading political content not as a single false message, but as repeated and overlapping narratives across platforms. They saw the same issue appear on TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups with different captions and emotional framing. One participant explained, "Sometimes I do not know which one is true because every account gives different evidence. The video looks real, but the explanation is different." This finding shows that disinformation works through repetition, fragmentation, and uncertainty. In this situation, citizens do not only question the content. They also question the broader information environment.

The second theme is **trust negotiation through source evaluation**. Participants did not automatically believe or reject political information. They assessed the source, platform, tone, comment section, and whether the content had been clarified by mainstream media or fact-checking institutions. Some participants trusted information from official government accounts, while others viewed official clarification with suspicion when it appeared late or too defensive. A journalist informant stated, "People do not only ask whether the information is true. They ask who benefits from this information." This pattern shows that political trust is shaped by the perceived intention behind information. Citizens evaluate political messages not only based on factual accuracy, but also based on credibility, transparency, and perceived political interest.

The third theme is **emotional responses and political identity**. Several participants admitted that they were more likely to engage with political content when it triggered anger, fear, pride, or disappointment. Short videos with strong captions and dramatic music were seen as more

persuasive than long official explanations. One young voter said, “If the content matches what I already feel about a politician, I usually watch it until the end and sometimes share it with friends.” This statement shows that disinformation can become powerful when it connects with existing emotions and political identity. The data also show that participants often used community discussions to confirm their views. In some cases, this strengthened group solidarity. In other cases, it deepened distrust toward opposing political groups.

The fourth theme is **the weakening of deliberation in the digital public sphere**. Digital observation showed that political discussions often shifted from issue-based debate to personal attacks, sarcasm, distrust, and accusations of manipulation. In comment sections, users frequently questioned the motives of political actors, media outlets, influencers, and even fact-checkers. Some participants felt that digital political discussion had become less useful because people were more interested in defending their side than checking evidence. One participant stated, “Online debate rarely changes people’s opinion. It only makes people more convinced that the other side is lying.” This finding suggests that disinformation weakens the deliberative function of the digital public sphere by reducing the possibility of reasoned exchange and mutual understanding.

The findings also show that political trust does not disappear completely after exposure to disinformation. Instead, it becomes selective and conditional. Participants tended to trust institutions when communication was fast, clear, consistent, and supported by accessible evidence. They became more skeptical when public officials ignored viral issues, used unclear language, or blamed citizens for believing false information. This pattern indicates that trust is not only related to the truth of information, but also to the quality of public communication. Citizens expect institutions to respond transparently, explain policy decisions, and correct misleading narratives without appearing partisan.

Another important finding concerns the role of fact-checking and digital literacy. Participants who were familiar with fact-checking websites showed stronger verification habits. They compared information, searched for original sources, and waited before sharing sensitive political content. However, several participants said that fact-checking articles were often too late, too long, or less visible than viral disinformation. One informant from a digital community stated, “Fact-checking is useful, but many people only read it after the hoax has already spread everywhere.” This shows that fact-checking has value, but its effectiveness depends on timing, accessibility, platform visibility, and public trust in the checking institution.

Overall, the results show that digital disinformation affects political trust through a layered process. First, citizens encounter confusing political narratives across platforms. Second, they evaluate sources based on credibility, identity, and perceived intention. Third, emotional reactions influence whether they believe, ignore, or share information. Fourth, repeated exposure to conflicting claims shapes selective trust or distrust toward political actors and institutions. These findings confirm that the relationship between digital disinformation and political trust must be understood as a social and interpretive process within the digital public sphere.

Discussion

The findings support the view that disinformation is part of contemporary political communication, not merely a technical problem of inaccurate information. Freelon and Wells (2020) argue that disinformation operates within political communication systems where actors compete to shape public perception. This study strengthens that argument by showing that Indonesian citizens experience disinformation as a continuous political atmosphere marked by uncertainty, suspicion, and repeated exposure to conflicting claims. In this context, the digital public sphere does not always create rational public debate. It can also become a space where citizens struggle to distinguish evidence from manipulation.

The finding on visual and emotional disinformation is consistent with Hameleers et al. (2020), who found that multimodal disinformation can influence audiences because it combines textual

claims with visual and emotional signals. In this study, participants described short videos, edited images, and dramatic captions as more persuasive than long explanations. This finding is relevant to Indonesia because political communication increasingly moves through visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. The shift from text-based discussion to visual and affective content changes how citizens process political information. It also makes correction more difficult because emotional impressions often remain even after factual clarification appears.

The study also confirms that trust plays a central role in how citizens respond to disinformation. Ognyanova et al. (2020) found that exposure to misinformation can affect trust in media and government depending on political alignment. This study adds a qualitative explanation by showing how citizens negotiate trust through source evaluation, perceived intention, and previous institutional experience. Participants did not only ask whether information was correct. They also asked whether the source had political interests, whether the institution had communicated honestly before, and whether clarification appeared credible. This finding shows that political trust is built through repeated communication practices, not only through formal institutional status.

The results also align with Buchanan (2021), who argues that trust and belief influence the sharing of political disinformation on social media. In this study, participants were more likely to engage with information that matched their emotions or previous political views. This indicates that disinformation spreads not only because people lack knowledge, but also because certain narratives feel socially and emotionally meaningful. This finding is important for the Indonesian context because political identity often intersects with religion, community affiliation, regional loyalty, and perceptions of social justice. As a result, corrective information may fail when it only provides facts without addressing the emotional and identity-based reasons behind belief.

The finding on user behavior supports Effendi's (2023) study on hoax information in Indonesia. Effendi found that sensational content spreads quickly because users respond to provocative narratives and weak verification practices. This study extends that finding by showing that users also share or accept disinformation because they want to participate in political conversation, defend group identity, or express dissatisfaction toward political actors. Therefore, disinformation should not be understood only as a supply-side problem created by political actors or anonymous accounts. It also depends on everyday participation practices within digital communities.

The weakening of deliberation in the digital public sphere confirms concerns about the quality of digital democracy in Indonesia. Hasan (2024) explains that social media became a contested political public space during the 2024 election. This study shows that contestation often moves away from argument-based debate and toward suspicion, accusation, and identity defense. This condition challenges the ideal of the public sphere as a space for rational-critical discussion. The Indonesian digital public sphere still enables participation, but its deliberative quality becomes weaker when citizens no longer trust the information environment or the motives of other participants.

The findings also relate to Sarjito's (2024) argument that hoaxes and disinformation can weaken social resilience and increase distrust toward government institutions. This study adds that distrust does not always appear as total rejection of the state. Instead, many participants developed selective trust. They trusted certain institutions, rejected others, and evaluated each political message case by case. This selective trust is important because it shows that citizens remain active interpreters. They are not passive victims of disinformation. However, selective trust can become unstable when public communication lacks speed, clarity, and transparency.

The role of fact-checking in this study supports Luthfia et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of technology, public engagement, journalists, NGOs, and fact-checking platforms in combating disinformation in Indonesia. The findings show that fact-checking helps citizens verify claims, but it often loses visibility against viral disinformation. This suggests that fact-checking

must not only focus on accuracy. It must also consider communication format, platform timing, and public accessibility. Shorter explanations, visual clarification, and collaboration with community actors may increase the reach of corrections.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the digital public sphere literature by showing that digital disinformation affects political trust through interpretation, emotion, identity, and institutional communication. The study suggests that political trust in the digital era cannot be separated from citizens' everyday experiences with platform-based information. Trust develops not only from institutional performance, but also from how institutions appear, respond, and communicate within the digital public sphere. This expands the discussion of political trust by placing platform dynamics and citizen interpretation at the center of analysis.

Practically, the findings suggest that government institutions, election bodies, civil society organizations, and media actors need to strengthen public communication strategies. Fast clarification, transparent evidence, consistent messaging, and accessible language can help reduce uncertainty. Digital literacy programs should also move beyond teaching citizens how to identify fake news. They need to address emotional manipulation, source evaluation, platform algorithms, and responsible sharing behavior. For platform governance, the findings show the need for stronger collaboration between social media companies, fact-checkers, journalists, and community leaders to reduce the spread of manipulative political content.

This study also offers direction for future research. Future studies can compare citizens' experiences across urban and rural areas to understand how digital infrastructure and local political culture shape responses to disinformation. Further research can also examine specific platforms, such as TikTok or WhatsApp, because each platform has different patterns of visibility, sharing, and trust formation. Quantitative studies may also test the relationship between exposure to disinformation, digital literacy, media trust, and political trust among wider Indonesian populations. These future studies can strengthen understanding of how Indonesia's digital public sphere shapes democratic trust in a changing media environment.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that digital disinformation shapes political trust in Indonesia through a layered process of exposure, interpretation, emotional response, source evaluation, and selective trust formation. The findings show that citizens do not experience disinformation only as false information, but as political noise that creates uncertainty in the digital public sphere. Participants negotiated trust by assessing source credibility, institutional response, political intention, and alignment with personal or group identity. This study contributes to the literature by showing that political trust in the digital era is not only shaped by institutional performance, but also by citizens' daily encounters with platform-based political information.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the digital public sphere perspective by explaining how disinformation can weaken deliberation, increase skepticism, and reshape the relationship between citizens and political institutions. Practically, the findings highlight the need for faster, clearer, and more transparent public communication from state institutions, media, and election bodies. From a policy perspective, stronger collaboration among government, fact-checkers, civil society, and digital platforms is needed to reduce manipulative political content without limiting democratic participation. Future research should compare urban and rural experiences, examine specific platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp, and test the relationship between digital literacy, disinformation exposure, media trust, and political trust in a broader population.

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