



## Original Article

# Dynamics of Public Trust in Government amid Information Disruption in Southeast Asia

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### Abstract:

Information disruption characterized by the acceleration of digital communication flows, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and the fragmentation of online public spaces have affected the pattern of public trust in governments in Southeast Asia. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of public trust in the context of information disorder, paying attention to the role of institutional factors and the cognitive capacity of the community. The study used a mixed-methods approach by combining a quantitative survey of 720 adult respondents ( $\geq 18$  years) recruited through stratified purposive sampling in three Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as in-depth interviews with 24 key informants consisting of government officials, journalists, academics, and civil society representatives. Regression analysis and differential testing showed that exposure to disinformation content was significantly negatively associated with the level of public trust in government institutions, particularly in the credibility aspect of policy communication. However, the results of the study also show that digital media literacy and perception of government transparency function as protective variables that can moderate the negative impact of information disruption. The qualitative findings confirm that the decline in public trust is not only triggered by the existence of false information, but also by weaknesses in government communication responses that are considered less responsive and participatory. This research makes a theoretical contribution to the understanding of public trust in the digital information ecosystem in Southeast Asia and offers policy implications in the form of strengthening public communication strategies, improving information literacy, and developing cross-sectoral collaborative mechanisms in the face of information disruption.

**Keywords:** Public Trust; Information Disruption; Disinformation; Government Communication; Digital Media Literacy

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## Introduction

The development of digital technology in the last two decades has fundamentally transformed the structure and dynamics of the public information ecosystem in various regions of the world, including Southeast Asia ([Curtis et al., 2022](#)). The digitization of communication, supported by the expansion of social media, instant messaging platforms, and data-driven content distribution algorithms, not only accelerates the flow of information, but also blurs the boundaries between factual information, opinions, and narrative manipulation ([Ilis, 2024](#); [Lovari & Valentini, 2020](#)). This condition creates an increasingly complex information environment, where misinformation and disinformation are no longer incidental, but rather a structural part of discourse competition in the digital public space. In this situation, the state has shifted its position from a hegemonic actor in the production of public information to one of the many actors who seek to influence public perception and trust ([Jaques et al., 2019](#); [Sevignani, 2022](#)).

Public trust in the government is a key element in the sustainability of modern governance ([Modise & Modise, 2023](#)). In the perspective of social and political science, trust is understood as a normative and instrumental relationship between citizens and state institutions, which reflects expectations of the competence, integrity, and orientation of public interest of government administrators. An adequate level of trust contributes to political legitimacy, the effectiveness of policy implementation, and the readiness of the public to comply with regulations, especially in crisis situations. Conversely, weakening public trust can result in institutional delegitimization, increased political cynicism, and social fragmentation that ultimately hinders the state's capacity to carry out its basic functions ([Bhutto, 2024](#); [Boly & Gillanders, 2023](#)).

In the context of information disruption, the relationship between public trust and government performance has become increasingly vulnerable. Repeated exposure to manipulative content, conspiratorial narratives, and false information has the potential to undermine the credibility of official information sources, even when the resulting policies have a strong empirical basis ([Hosking, 2019](#); [Lewis et al., 2023](#); [Norris, 2022](#)). Furthermore, information disruption reinforces the logic of emotions and identity affiliation in the formation of public opinion, so that trust in the government is not solely determined by objective performance, but also by subjective perceptions formed through digital interactions. Thus, public trust needs to be understood as a dynamic construct that is constantly being negotiated in a fragmented information ecosystem ([Haider & Sundin, 2022](#)).

Southeast Asia offers a highly relevant empirical context for examining the phenomenon. This region is characterized by internet penetration and high use of social media, the growth of the digital middle class, and the diversity of political regimes that include electoral democracy, hybrid regimes, and more authoritarian systems ([Alami et al., 2022](#); [Lee et al., 2020](#); [Sinpeng, 2020](#)). At the same time, the level of digital media literacy in the region still shows significant gaps, both between countries and between social groups. In many cases, social media has become a major source of political and public policy information, often surpassing the mainstream media and official government communication channels. This condition increases people's vulnerability to disinformation, while complicating the government's efforts to maintain epistemic authority and public trust ([Hameleers et al., 2022](#)).

Previous literature generally confirms a negative relationship between exposure to misinformation and the level of trust in political institutions. However, most of the research still focuses on the context of Western countries with relatively high levels of

institutionalization of democracy and media literacy. As a result, the findings have not fully captured the social, political, and cultural complexities of Southeast Asia ([Kim, 2020](#)). In addition, many studies tend to view the impact of information disruption in a linear manner, without considering the role of mediation and moderation variables, such as digital media literacy, the quality of government communication, and institutional capacity to respond to rapid and often unexpected information dynamics ([Gjerazi, 2024](#)). This limitation creates a significant research gap.

On the other hand, the government's response to information disruption in Southeast Asia shows an ambivalent pattern. Various initiatives have been developed, ranging from increasing data transparency, strengthening digital-based policy communication, to media literacy programs for the community. However, this response often goes hand in hand with a restrictive regulatory approach to the digital space, including strengthening state control over online information flows. In some contexts, an overly repressive approach has the potential to deepen public distrust and reinforce negative perceptions of the government. This shows that information disruption cannot be understood solely as a technological problem, but as an issue of governance, political communication, and power relations between the state and citizens ([Hafel, 2023](#)).

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the dynamics of public trust in the government in the midst of information disruption in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Specifically, this study examines, the extent to which exposure to disinformation correlates with the level of public trust in government institutions, how digital media literacy and government transparency perceptions moderate the relationship, and how the government's communication response is perceived by key actors in the public space. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to integrate quantitative and qualitative analysis to obtain a more comprehensive and contextual understanding ([Gu et al., 2023](#)).

The contribution of this research is theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this article develops a dynamic public trust analytical framework by integrating the perspective of information disruption and digital communication in the context of Southeast Asia. In practice, the research findings are expected to be the basis for the formulation of public communication policies and disinformation mitigation strategies that not only emphasize controlling the flow of information, but also strengthening public trust, institutional legitimacy, and democratic quality. The structure of this article is further structured as follows: the methodology section explains the research design and analysis techniques; The results and discussion section presents the main empirical findings; and the conclusion section summarizes the theoretical implications as well as policy recommendations.

## Methods

### Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of public trust in the government in the midst of information disruption ([Dawadi et al., 2021; Toyon, 2021](#)). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to statistically identify patterns of relationships between variables, as well as interpret the findings in depth through a qualitative exploration of the experiences and perceptions of key actors. The integration of the two methods is carried

out at the stage of interpretation of the results, so that the quantitative and qualitative findings complement each other.

### Research Location and Context

The research was carried out in three Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The selection of these three countries was based on several considerations, the relatively high level of internet and social media penetration, the diversity of political systems and public communication governance, and the empirical relevance of the issue of information disruption in political dynamics and public policy. As such, this study is not intended to produce a thorough regional generalization, but rather to provide a contextual comparative understanding.

### Quantitative Methods

#### 1) Population and Sampling Techniques

The quantitative research population is citizens aged 18 years and above who actively use the internet and social media. The survey was conducted on a total of 720 respondents, with a relatively balanced distribution in the three study countries. Given the limited access to the field and differences in the national context, respondents were recruited using stratified purposive sampling techniques based on country, gender, age group, and education level variables. This approach was chosen to ensure the diversity of respondent characteristics while maintaining the operational feasibility of the study.

#### 2) Instruments and Variable Measurements

Quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire that was distributed online. The variables of public trust in the government are measured using the institutional trust index which includes the dimensions of competence, integrity, and credibility of government communication. Disinformation exposure is measured based on the frequency and intensity of respondents' exposure to unverified or proven misleading content on social media. Digital media literacy is measured through a series of questions related to the ability to evaluate information sources, verify facts, and understand platform algorithms. The perception of government transparency is measured through respondents' assessment of information disclosure and consistency of policy messages.

#### 3) Quantitative Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data analysis was carried out using descriptive and inferential statistics. The reliability test of the instrument was carried out with Cronbach's alpha coefficient, while the validity of the construct was evaluated through exploratory factor analysis. To test the relationship between disinformation exposure and public belief, multiple linear regression analysis was used. The effect of moderation of digital media literacy and the perception of government transparency was analyzed using variable interactions in the regression model. All analyses were carried out with a significance level of 0.05.

## Qualitative Method

### 1) Informants and Data Collection Techniques

The qualitative component of this research involved 24 purposively selected key informants, consisting of government officials involved in policy communication, mainstream and digital media journalists, academics, and representatives of civil society organizations. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow for an in-depth exploration of informants' perceptions of information disruption, government communication strategies, and their implications for public trust.

### 2) Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis process includes the stages of transcription, open coding, thematic grouping, and interpretation of findings. To increase the credibility of the analysis, triangulation of sources was carried out by comparing the views between groups of informants and associating qualitative findings with the results of quantitative analysis.

## Ethical Considerations

This research pays attention to the ethical principles of social research. All respondents and informants were given an explanation of the research objectives and their rights as participants. Participation is voluntary, and the confidentiality of respondents' identities is maintained through data anonymization. The data collected is used solely for academic and scientific research purposes.

## Research Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the use of online surveys that have the potential to exclude community groups with limited internet access, as well as cross-sectional designs that limit the drawing of long-term causal conclusions. Nevertheless, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is expected to be able to provide a valid and meaningful empirical picture of the dynamics of public trust in the midst of information disruption.

## Results

### Quantitative Research Results

Descriptive analysis showed that the level of public trust in the government in the three study countries was in the moderate category with significant variation between countries. Respondents in Indonesia and Malaysia tend to show a relatively higher level of trust than respondents in the Philippines, especially in the dimension of government competence in public policy management. However, in the dimension of communication credibility, the three countries showed relatively low scores, indicating that there are trust issues directly related to the quality and consistency of information delivered by the government. A summary of descriptive statistics of public trust and disinformation exposure in the three countries is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Public Trust and Disinformation Exposure by Country

Country	Number of Respondents	Average Public Trust	SD	Average Disinformation Exposure
Indonesia	240	3.42	0.61	3.15
Malaysia	240	3.38	0.58	3.09
Philippines	240	3.01	0.65	3.47

Note: The measurement scale uses a Likert scale of 1–5. The average value shows that the level of public trust is in the moderate category, with variation between countries.

The results of multiple linear regression analysis confirmed a significant negative relationship between disinformation exposure and the level of public trust in government institutions ( $\beta < 0$ , significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). The higher the intensity of respondents' exposure to disinformation content on social media, the lower their level of trust in the government, especially in terms of integrity and transparency. These findings support the argument that information disruption plays a role as an erosive factor to institutional legitimacy.

The moderation test showed that digital media literacy served as a significant protective variable. The interaction between disinformation exposure and digital media literacy showed a positive coefficient, indicating that respondents with higher levels of media literacy tended to be able to maintain a more stable level of trust despite exposure to disinformation. Similarly, perceptions of government transparency have been shown to moderate the relationship between disinformation exposure and public trust. Respondents who considered the government to be more transparent showed a lower decrease in trust than those who viewed the government as less open.

Table 2. Model Fit Statistics for Regression and Moderation Analysis

Models	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F-statistic	p (Model)
Major Regression	0.31	0.29	42,6	< 0.001
Moderation Model	0.39	0.37	39,8	< 0.001

Note: The moderation model showed a substantial increase in explainability compared to the main regression model, confirming the role of digital media literacy and government transparency as moderator variables.

### Qualitative Research Results

The qualitative findings from the in-depth interviews enriched the quantitative results by explaining in detail the mechanisms that affect public trust in the government in the midst of information disruption. The majority of informants emphasized that the decline in public trust was not only caused by disinformation, but also by the quality of government communication responses that were considered slow, reactive, inconsistent, and lacking empathy. Speed, consistency, and empathy in government communication emerged as critical factors that affect citizens' perceptions of institutional legitimacy.

In Indonesia, a national journalist stressed the need for a quick and transparent response;

*"The government is often late in responding to issues that go viral on social media. When the clarification finally appeared, the alternative narrative was*

*already trusted by the public. This makes the correction process much more difficult, because hoaxes and inaccurate information have become widespread" (JRN-ID-03, interview, March 12, 2024).*

A civil society activist added that the government's slow communication creates a loophole for polarization of opinions;

*"We often see issues that should be clarified quickly but are allowed to drag on. The public begins to form its own opinions, and often those opinions are influenced by uncredible sources. Public trust is declining not only because of false information, but also because of the slow response of institutions" (CSO-ID-01, interview, March 14, 2024).*

From an academic perspective, a researcher in Indonesia emphasized the importance of building communication strategies that are empathetic and relevant to society;

*"Public trust has declined not only because of disinformation, but because the government's message does not touch the needs and interests of citizens. Transparency alone is not enough; society needs communication that understands their social context and shows empathy" (ACA-ID-02, interview, March 28, 2024).*

In Malaysia, a similar dynamic emerged. A senior journalist highlighted the inconsistency of the government's narrative;

*"Often the official message of the government changes without adequate explanation. The public becomes confused and seeks information from alternative sources, including less credible ones. Consistency of messages is essential to build trust" (JRN-MY-01, interview, March 22, 2024).*

A Malaysian government official added a critical reflection on the institutional challenges:

*"We are trying to improve the flow of communication, but internal bureaucracy often slows down the process. We are aware that this affects public perception, as the public judges the slow response as unpreparedness or lack of attention" (GOV-MY-02, interview, March 24, 2024).*

A Malaysian academic emphasized that public media literacy is a significant protective factor;

*"The ability of citizens to assess the credibility of information is an important determinant in maintaining trust. People who have higher media literacy can withstand the negative effects of disinformation and still trust the government, as long as the official message is consistent" (ACA-MY-03, interview, March 29, 2024).*

In the Philippines, a civil society activist highlighted the government's overly regulatory focus;

*"The government is more often trying to control information than building participatory communication. As a result, the public trusts information spread on social media, even if it is not accurate" (CSO-PH-03, interview, March 19, 2024).*

A Filipino journalist added;

*"The government's narrative often changes, while social media moves very quickly. When official messages are inconsistent or late, public trust declines, and they look for other sources" (JRN-PH-02, interview, March 21, 2024).*

A government official in the Philippines highlighted the limited capacity of institutions;

*"We face cross-platform challenges and limited resources to monitor disinformation. The slow response makes the government seem incapable of managing information, despite its good intentions" (GOV-PH-01, interview, March 25, 2024).*

Academics in the Philippines emphasize the importance of distinguishing legitimate criticism from disinformation;

*"If all public criticism is treated as disinformation, the legitimacy of the government is threatened. The public needs a healthy space for dialogue, not just one-sided clarification. Trust is built through transparent and responsive communication" (ACA-PH-04, interview, March 30, 2024).*

Some cross-border informants also emphasized that a regulatory approach that is too strict to digital content can lead to a repressive perception. An Indonesian government official said:

*"We want to control disinformation, but too harsh action can provoke public criticism and deepen the trust deficit. There must be a balance between controlling content and maintaining public space" (GOV-ID-04, interview, March 25, 2024).*

A Malaysian journalist added;

*"Information restriction measures are often interpreted as censorship. This actually strengthens skepticism of the government and gives rise to a more radical alternative narrative" (JRN-MY-02, interview, March 27, 2024).*

These interviews confirm that the dynamics of public trust in the era of information disruption are strongly shaped by multiple interrelated factors. The quality of the government's communication response—particularly in terms of speed, consistency,

transparency, and empathy—emerges as a critical determinant of public trust. In addition, community media literacy plays a central role in shaping citizens' ability to critically assess and interpret information circulating in digital spaces. Equally important is the balance between efforts to control disinformation and the protection of freedom of expression, as this balance significantly influences public perceptions of governmental legitimacy. These findings underscore that disinformation alone does not account for declining public trust; rather, it is the complex interaction between institutional performance, public perceptions, and the digital capacity of society that ultimately shapes the level of trust in government.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how public trust in government is shaped amid information disruption in Southeast Asia by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence. Overall, the results confirm that disinformation exposure constitutes a significant challenge to institutional trust, yet its impact is neither uniform nor inevitable. Instead, the erosion of public trust emerges as a conditional process shaped by communication quality, institutional transparency, and citizens' digital capacities.

The quantitative results demonstrate a significant negative relationship between disinformation exposure and public trust, reinforcing prior studies that identify information disorder as an erosive force against political legitimacy. Higher exposure to disinformation, particularly through social media, is associated with lower trust in government integrity and transparency ([Rodríguez-Pérez & García-Vargas, 2021](#)). This finding aligns with theories of information overload and cognitive uncertainty, which suggest that conflicting and misleading information undermines citizens' confidence in authoritative institutions ([Kozyreva et al., 2020; Youvan, 2024](#)). Importantly, the descriptive patterns reveal cross-national variation, with Indonesia and Malaysia exhibiting relatively higher trust levels than the Philippines, suggesting that national communication environments and institutional contexts mediate the effects of information disruption.

Beyond this direct relationship, the moderation analysis offers critical insight into the conditions under which disinformation weakens trust. Digital media literacy emerges as a significant protective factor, indicating that individuals with stronger evaluative skills are better equipped to navigate misleading information without fully disengaging from institutional trust. This finding supports scholarship emphasizing media literacy as a form of democratic resilience, enabling citizens to distinguish between credible information, misinformation, and legitimate criticism. In this sense, public trust is not merely a function of information supply but also of citizens' interpretive capacity.

Similarly, perceived government transparency moderates the negative effect of disinformation on trust. Respondents who view government institutions as transparent exhibit greater trust stability, even when exposed to misleading content. This suggests that transparency functions as a reputational buffer, reinforcing institutional credibility and mitigating uncertainty during periods of information disruption. Rather than acting solely as a normative democratic ideal, transparency operates as a strategic communicative asset that sustains legitimacy in contested information environments.

The qualitative findings deepen and contextualize these statistical relationships by illuminating how communication practices shape public perceptions. Across the three

countries, informants consistently emphasize that declining trust is not driven by disinformation alone but by government responses that are perceived as slow, reactive, inconsistent, and lacking empathy. These perceptions help explain why disinformation gains traction: delays and inconsistencies in official communication create informational vacuums that alternative narratives rapidly fill. In this regard, disinformation thrives less because of its intrinsic persuasiveness than because of institutional communicative weaknesses.

Moreover, the interviews reveal that overly restrictive regulatory responses to digital content can inadvertently exacerbate trust deficits. Informants from media, civil society, and academia caution that aggressive content control risks being interpreted as censorship, thereby reinforcing skepticism toward government motives. This finding underscores the delicate balance between countering disinformation and safeguarding freedom of expression. Trust appears to be strengthened not by suppressing information, but by fostering open, responsive, and dialogic communication practices.

Taken together, the findings highlight that public trust in the era of information disruption is shaped by a complex interaction between institutional performance, communication strategies, and societal digital capacity (You et al., 2024). Disinformation acts as a stressor rather than a sole determinant; its impact depends on how governments communicate, how transparent they are perceived to be, and how well citizens can critically evaluate information. This integrated perspective advances existing literature by moving beyond linear explanations and demonstrating that trust erosion is contingent, contextual, and potentially reversible.

From a policy perspective, these results suggest that efforts to combat disinformation should extend beyond regulatory and technical measures. Strengthening digital media literacy, institutionalizing transparent communication practices, and prioritizing speed, consistency, and empathy in government messaging are essential for sustaining public trust. In doing so, governments can enhance their legitimacy not by controlling narratives, but by reinforcing their credibility in an increasingly fragmented information environment.

## Conclusion

This study shows that exposure to disinformation has a negative effect on public trust in governments in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, the relationship is moderated by digital media literacy and government transparency perceptions; People with high literacy and a transparent perception of the government tend to maintain trust better.

The qualitative findings confirm that the quality of government communication responses—speed, consistency, empathy, and adaptation to digital dynamics—are key factors in shaping public trust. Disinformation is not the only factor; The complex interaction between institutional performance, public media literacy, and public perception determines the level of trust.

In practical terms, disinformation mitigation strategies should integrate strengthening media literacy, transparency, and responsive and participatory government communication. Theoretically, this study expands the literature on public trust by linking information disruption and digital communication in the context of Southeast Asia.

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