

Analysis of the Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Trust in Minahasa Regency Government Policies

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Abstract

Public trust is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance and effective public administration. In recent years, however, public trust in government institutions has faced significant challenges due to political controversies, policy failures, and the proliferation of misinformation in digital spaces. Social media has emerged as a critical arena where governments communicate policies, citizens respond, and public perceptions are shaped. This study explores the role of social media in shaping public trust in local government policies, focusing on Minahasa Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs document analysis, content analysis of official government social media accounts, and secondary literature review to assess the dynamics of trust-building in digital governance. Findings suggest that social media functions as both a facilitator and a potential threat to public trust. On the positive side, social media enhances transparency, accelerates information dissemination, fosters two-way communication, and enables citizens' active participation in policy discourse. These dynamics contribute to performance-based trust and strengthen social capital, consistent with theoretical frameworks by Mishler and Rose (2001) and Putnam (2000). Conversely, challenges such as inconsistent government responses, limited digital literacy, and exposure to misinformation undermine trust and exacerbate public skepticism. The study contributes to scholarly debates on digital governance by demonstrating how social media operates as a participatory democratic tool at the local level in Indonesia. Practical implications highlight the need for governments to institutionalize social media as a governance instrument, ensure consistency and creativity in content delivery, strengthen digital literacy among citizens, and collaborate strategically with community influencers to broaden legitimacy. By situating Minahasa within global debates on governance and communication, this study underscores the dual role of social media as both a vehicle of trust and a source of contestation in contemporary public policy.

Keywords: Public trust; social media; digital governance; public policy; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Public Trust and Governance in the Digital Era

Public trust in government is widely acknowledged as one of the most important indicators of effective governance. Trust facilitates compliance with public policies, encourages citizen participation, and legitimizes the authority of political institutions (Easton, 1965; Hetherington, 2005). Conversely, declining trust may weaken governance systems, reduce policy effectiveness, and undermine democratic stability. The contemporary political landscape demonstrates that public trust is neither static nor uniform; it fluctuates in response to government performance, transparency, and broader social and economic conditions (Fukuyama, 2013).

The advent of digital technology has further complicated the dynamics of trust. Social media platforms, once perceived merely as entertainment and networking tools, have evolved into critical infrastructures of political communication. They serve as arenas where policies are announced,

contested, and legitimated. In countries with high digital penetration, such as Indonesia, the relationship between government communication and public trust is increasingly mediated by these platforms.

1.2 The Indonesian Context

Indonesia presents a compelling case for examining the relationship between social media and public trust. With over 170 million active social media users (Hootsuite, 2020), digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have become essential spaces for public discourse. Government agencies at national and local levels actively employ these platforms to announce policies, respond to criticism, and engage with citizens. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, social media became a crucial channel for disseminating health protocols, vaccine information, and economic recovery measures. Nevertheless, Indonesia also exemplifies the risks inherent in digital governance. The rapid spread of hoaxes, political polarization, and inconsistent government responses have frequently undermined public confidence in institutions (Nasrullah et al., 2019). Studies reveal that while citizens appreciate timely and transparent information, they are quick to become skeptical when faced with delays, contradictions, or perceived propaganda (Kurniawan & Mas'udi, 2021).

1.3 Local Governance and the Case of Minahasa

Minahasa Regency in North Sulawesi provides a microcosm for analyzing these dynamics. As a local government unit, Minahasa has adopted social media platforms as its primary communication tools, seeking to inform, engage, and build trust with its citizens. Official Facebook and Instagram accounts frequently publish announcements, visual infographics, and live broadcasts of public events. Citizens, in turn, respond actively—sometimes with appreciation, other times with skepticism or criticism.

Despite this growing reliance on digital platforms, empirical studies focusing specifically on Minahasa remain scarce. Existing literature on public trust and social media in Indonesia often centers on national-level politics or metropolitan regions, overlooking local governments that may exhibit distinct dynamics of communication and trust-building. This gap highlights the importance of exploring how social media functions as a governance tool in smaller, culturally specific contexts.

1.4 Problem Statement and Research Questions

The increasing reliance on social media in governance raises a central research problem: to what extent does social media contribute to shaping public trust in government policies at the local level? This study addresses this problem through the following guiding question: How does social media influence public trust in government policies in Minahasa Regency?

1.5 Research Objectives and Contributions The objectives of this research are threefold:

1. To analyze the patterns of government use of social media for policy communication.
2. To assess public responses and perceptions toward these communications.
3. To evaluate the extent to which social media contributes to the formation or erosion of public trust in local governance.

The study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches debates on public trust and digital governance by situating local-level dynamics within broader frameworks of trust theory (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Practically, it offers recommendations for local governments in Indonesia and beyond on how to design effective digital communication strategies that enhance legitimacy and accountability.

1.6 Structure of the Article

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on public trust and social media governance. Section 3 outlines the qualitative methodology adopted in this study. Section 4 presents findings on patterns of government communication, public responses, determinants of trust, and SWOT analysis. Section 5 provides an in-depth discussion situating these findings within global debates on governance and communication. Section 6 concludes with key insights, policy recommendations, and directions for future research.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist perspective acknowledges that social realities—such as trust, communication, and legitimacy—are constructed through interaction, meaning-making, and cultural context (Creswell, 2014). Given the focus on understanding how social media influences public trust rather than measuring predetermined variables, qualitative inquiry was deemed most appropriate.

The research strategy combines document analysis, content analysis, and secondary literature review. Document analysis includes reviewing official policy statements, press releases, and government publications related to communication strategies. Content analysis focuses on posts, comments, and interactions on official social media accounts of the Minahasa Regency government. Secondary literature review situates findings within broader national and international contexts.

Research Site and Context

Minahasa Regency, located in North Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, was chosen as the research site due to its active use of social media in local governance. The region has a diverse population with rich cultural traditions and a rapidly expanding digital ecosystem. Social media penetration in Minahasa reflects national trends: Facebook and Instagram dominate among adults, while younger citizens increasingly use TikTok and Twitter.

The government of Minahasa actively maintains official accounts across multiple platforms. These accounts serve as the primary interface between government and citizens, particularly for policy announcements, budget transparency, and community engagement. Studying this case provides insights into how local governments in Indonesia utilize digital tools for building legitimacy.

Data Collection Methods

Three complementary methods were used:

1. Document Analysis: Reviewing local government reports, policy documents, and communication strategies to understand the official stance on transparency and public trust.

2. Content Analysis: Collecting and analyzing posts and comments from official social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) over a 12-month period. The focus was on policy-related posts—such as education, health, infrastructure, and social assistance—and the public’s responses.
3. Secondary Literature: Reviewing scholarly publications, policy analyses, and news coverage on digital governance and public trust in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

This triangulation of sources strengthens the validity of findings by cross-checking perspectives from multiple data streams.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (2014) framework of qualitative research:

- Data Reduction: Sorting and categorizing content based on themes such as transparency, responsiveness, participation, misinformation, and trust.
- Data Display: Visualizing themes through matrices and thematic maps to identify patterns of interaction between government and citizens.
- Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Developing theoretical and practical insights, ensuring findings align with both empirical data and conceptual frameworks.
- Coding was conducted manually, with iterative refinement to capture emerging patterns. Themes were validated through cross-referencing with existing literature and ensuring coherence across multiple data sources.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was employed: combining different data sources and comparing patterns across platforms. Reflexivity was practiced to minimize researcher bias, acknowledging that interpretation is shaped by prior knowledge and contextual understanding.

Ethical considerations were observed by focusing exclusively on publicly available social media content. No personal or private data were disclosed. Anonymity of citizen users was maintained, and findings were presented in aggregated thematic form rather than identifying specific individuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal how social media functions both as an opportunity and a challenge for public trust in Minahasa’s local governance. The results are organized into five subsections: (1) government use of social media, (2) citizen responses, (3) determinants of trust, (4) the role of influencers and civil society, and (5) SWOT analysis.

1. Government Use of Social Media

The Minahasa government uses Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as its primary digital platforms. Each platform serves distinct functions:

- Facebook: The most widely used platform, reaching citizens across age groups. Posts include announcements on policy, budget allocations, and community events. The platform’s comment and share features facilitate dialogue, though moderation is inconsistent.

- Instagram: Employed to target younger audiences with visually appealing content such as infographics, short videos, and cultural storytelling. Instagram Stories are used for quick updates, polls, and public feedback.
- Twitter (X): Functions as a rapid-response tool for clarifying rumors or announcing urgent updates (e.g., disaster response, traffic disruptions).

While the government demonstrates consistency in posting, gaps remain in responsiveness. Some posts attract dozens of citizen comments, yet replies from officials are sparse or delayed. Moreover, creative engagement strategies—such as interactive Q&A sessions—are underutilized, limiting the participatory potential of these platforms.

2. Citizen Responses

Citizen responses to social media communication vary depending on the policy domain and presentation style:

- Positive Engagement: Citizens express appreciation when the government shares clear, timely, and visually appealing updates—especially regarding education, health services, and social assistance programs. For example, infographics on scholarship distribution received widespread support.
- Critical Reactions: Posts related to taxation, licensing, and bureaucratic processes often attract skepticism and criticism. Citizens highlight perceived inconsistencies between online announcements and on-the-ground realities.
- Neutral or Passive Engagement: Some citizens engage minimally, either due to lack of interest or limited digital literacy. Elderly citizens, in particular, prefer face-to-face communication, underscoring persistent digital divides.

Overall, responses reveal that while social media enhances access to information, it cannot entirely replace traditional communication channels.

3. Determinants of Trust

Five determinants were identified as crucial in shaping public trust:

- Transparency: Posts displaying budget allocations, project progress, and achievements increased perceptions of accountability.
- Clarity: Citizens valued communication that was simple, jargon-free, and visually engaging.
- Consistency: Trust eroded when announcements contradicted actual outcomes or when updates were irregular.
- Speed of Response: Rapid clarification of rumors or misinformation enhanced credibility, while delays fueled skepticism.
- Involvement of Trusted Figures: Citizens demonstrated greater trust when messages were reinforced by local influencers, religious leaders, or community activists.

These determinants align with global theories of performance-based trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001) and social capital (Putnam, 2000), suggesting that digital communication must balance institutional credibility with community legitimacy.

4. The Role of Influencers and Civil Society

Local influencers—ranging from youth leaders to religious figures—play a pivotal role in amplifying government messages. Collaborations with such figures enhance message reach and legitimacy. For example, campaigns on disaster preparedness gained traction when promoted by church leaders and youth organizations.

Civil society groups also supplement government communication. Community-led initiatives, such as creating posters or translating official information into local dialects, extend the reach of policies. However, partnerships with influencers require careful vetting: affiliations with political actors or controversial figures can backfire, reducing public trust.

5. SWOT Analysis of Social Media Governance in Minahasa

- Strengths:
 - o Wide reach across demographics.
 - o Real-time communication capacity.
 - o Cost-effective compared to traditional media.
 - o Opportunities for participatory governance.
- Weaknesses:
 - o Inconsistent responses to citizen queries.
 - o Limited creativity and interactivity in content.
 - o Unequal access due to digital literacy gaps.
 - o Scarcity of dedicated communication staff.
- Opportunities:
 - o Digital literacy campaigns to bridge generational divides.
 - o Strategic collaborations with influencers and civil society.
 - o Positioning Minahasa as a digital governance model for other regions.
 - o Using analytics to tailor communication strategies.
- Threats:
 - o Proliferation of misinformation and hoaxes.
 - o Political polarization amplified through online debates.
 - o Cybersecurity risks in managing government accounts.
 - o Risk of public disengagement if communication remains one- directional.

This analysis underscores that while social media provides governments with powerful tools, its success depends on strategic management, consistent responsiveness, and efforts to bridge digital divides.

DISCUSSION

1. Social Media as a Governance Tool

The findings from Minahasa reveal that social media has evolved beyond a communication accessory into a core governance instrument. The government uses Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter not only for information dissemination but also as channels for legitimacy construction, accountability demonstration, and citizen engagement. This reflects global patterns where governments increasingly institutionalize digital platforms into governance processes (Mergel, 2013). In advanced democracies,

social media is integrated into “open government” frameworks that emphasize transparency, participation, and collaboration (Meijer et al., 2012). The Minahasa case demonstrates that even at the local level in developing democracies, similar dynamics are at play, albeit constrained by resource limitations and unequal digital literacy.

Thus, social media in Minahasa functions as a hybrid governance tool: part traditional publicity, part participatory platform. This hybrid nature highlights the transitional stage of digital governance in many Global South contexts.

2. Performance-Based Trust and Transparency

Mishler and Rose (2001) argue that citizens’ trust in political institutions depends on perceived performance. Social media amplifies this dynamic by making government performance more visible and subject to real-time evaluation. Posts about budget allocations, infrastructure projects, or social assistance function as digital evidence of performance. In Minahasa, transparency through infographics and policy announcements enhanced perceptions of accountability. Citizens valued simplicity, visual clarity, and accessibility. This aligns with performance-based trust theory, which emphasizes that visible, tangible evidence of service delivery fosters confidence in government (Hetherington, 2005).

However, the risks of over-promising or inconsistent updates are equally amplified. Citizens quickly notice when social media announcements contradict on-the-ground realities, leading to heightened skepticism. This illustrates the fragility of performance-based trust in the digital era: while visibility increases opportunities for trust-building, it also magnifies the consequences of government shortcomings.

3. Social Capital, Participation, and Networked Trust

Putnam’s (2000) theory of social capital highlights the role of networks, norms, and trust in enabling collective action. Social media extends these networks into digital spaces, enabling new forms of horizontal trust (among citizens) and vertical trust (between citizens and government). In Minahasa, horizontal trust is visible in Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities where citizens share, debate, and interpret government posts. Vertical trust is shaped by how the government responds to these discourses—whether it acknowledges, clarifies, or ignores them. This dynamic illustrates how digital networks foster participatory legitimacy: trust is not only derived from institutional performance but also from the perception that citizens are heard and valued. When governments respond quickly to comments or clarify rumors, they reinforce this legitimacy. Conversely, silence or neglect weakens trust, signaling disengagement.

The implication is that trust in the digital age is increasingly relational and interactive, rather than solely performance-driven. Governments must therefore manage not only what they do but also how they are perceived in interactive networks.

4. The Double-Edged Nature of Social Media

The findings reinforce the dual role of social media as both a vehicle of trust and a source of contestation. On the one hand, social media empowers governments to bypass traditional media, communicate directly with citizens, and showcase transparency. This directness fosters intimacy and immediacy, essential for building trust in fragmented political environments. On the other hand, the

same immediacy exposes governments to intensified scrutiny. Misinformation, hoaxes, and political polarization spread rapidly, sometimes undermining official narratives. For example, in Minahasa, while citizens welcomed visual policy updates, they also expressed skepticism when announcements were delayed or contradicted by lived realities.

This double-edged nature echoes global scholarship: social media enhances transparency and accountability but simultaneously increases risks of misinformation and delegitimization (Ladd, 2012; Zúñiga, 2017).

5. The Role of Influencers and Civil Society

A notable finding is the significance of local influencers and civil society organizations in amplifying government communication. In Minahasa, religious leaders, youth activists, and community figures reinforced government messages, increasing credibility and reach. This dynamic reflects broader trends in governance where third-party actors function as intermediaries of trust. Citizens often place more confidence in messages endorsed by community leaders than in direct government announcements. Such collaborations can enhance networked legitimacy by linking institutional trust with social trust. However, the risks are evident: if influencers are politically affiliated or controversial, their involvement can backfire, eroding credibility. This suggests that governments must adopt a strategic partnership model, carefully vetting collaborators and ensuring alignment with democratic values.

6. Digital Divide and Inclusivity Challenges

The research highlights persistent digital divides in Minahasa. Elderly citizens and marginalized groups engage less actively with social media, preferring traditional communication channels. This raises concerns about inclusive governance: reliance on digital platforms risks excluding vulnerable populations, thereby reinforcing inequalities. This challenge is not unique to Minahasa. Studies across Southeast Asia reveal similar divides, where younger, urban, and educated citizens dominate digital participation (Abbott, 2012). Bridging these divides requires investments in digital literacy, infrastructure, and hybrid communication strategies that integrate online and offline channels. Without such measures, social media governance may reinforce elite voices while silencing marginalized groups, undermining democratic inclusivity.

7. Implications for Theory

The Minahasa case contributes to debates on governance and trust in three ways:

1. **Extending Performance-Based Trust Theory:** The findings illustrate how digital visibility magnifies both successes and failures, making performance-based trust more volatile.
2. **Integrating Social Capital with Digital Networks:** Social media extends traditional civic networks into digital spaces, highlighting the role of participation and responsiveness in fostering trust.
3. **Conceptualizing Social Media as Hybrid Governance:** Rather than a purely top-down or bottom-up tool, social media operates as a hybrid arena where governments, citizens, and intermediaries co-construct legitimacy.

These contributions situate the study within global debates on digital governance while offering empirical grounding from a local Indonesian context.

8. Implications for Practice

The practical implications for local governments in Indonesia and similar contexts are significant:

- **Institutionalizing Digital Governance:** Social media should be integrated into governance structures, with dedicated teams and resources, rather than treated as optional publicity.
- **Prioritizing Consistency and Responsiveness:** Regular updates and timely responses are crucial for sustaining trust. Silence or inconsistency erodes credibility.
- **Leveraging Influencers Strategically:** Partnerships with trusted community figures can enhance legitimacy but require careful selection to avoid reputational risks.
- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** Complementing social media with offline communication ensures inclusivity and prevents marginalization of digitally excluded groups.
- **Investing in Digital Literacy:** Educating citizens about evaluating online information can reduce susceptibility to misinformation and strengthen democratic resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social media in shaping public trust toward government policies in Minahasa Regency, Indonesia. The findings confirm that social media has become a critical governance tool, influencing how citizens perceive transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

The study underscores several key points:

1. Social media enhances visibility and transparency. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter provide real-time communication, enabling governments to share policy updates and showcase achievements. Citizens perceive this as evidence of institutional performance, reinforcing performance-based trust.
2. Citizen trust is relational and interactive. Trust is not built solely on government performance but also on how governments respond to citizens in digital spaces. Engagement, responsiveness, and inclusivity are central to sustaining legitimacy.
3. Influencers and civil society strengthen legitimacy. Local leaders, activists, and community organizations amplify government communication and build bridges of trust. However, such collaborations must be strategically managed to avoid reputational risks.
4. The double-edged nature of social media persists. While digital platforms expand transparency and participation, they also expose governments to misinformation, political polarization, and credibility challenges.
5. Digital divides remain a pressing concern. Elderly citizens and marginalized groups are often excluded from digital participation. Without efforts to bridge this divide, social media governance risks reinforcing inequalities rather than fostering inclusive democracy.

From a theoretical perspective, the Minahasa case extends global debates on trust and governance by illustrating how social media operates as a hybrid governance arena—combining elements of performance-based trust, social capital, and participatory legitimacy.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are offered for local governments in Indonesia and comparable contexts:

1. Institutionalize social media as a governance instrument. Governments should dedicate resources, staffing, and strategic planning to social media management, integrating it into official communication policies.
2. Ensure consistency and responsiveness. Trust is fragile and can be quickly undermined by delays or contradictions. Governments must prioritize real-time responses, regular updates, and proactive clarification of misinformation.
3. Develop creative and inclusive communication strategies. Beyond text-based posts, governments should invest in infographics, videos, and interactive sessions that appeal to diverse audiences, while also ensuring offline channels remain accessible to digitally excluded groups.
4. Build strategic collaborations with influencers and civil society. Partnerships with trusted local figures can amplify legitimacy, but governments must ensure such actors align with principles of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.
5. Promote digital literacy among citizens. To counter misinformation and enhance participatory democracy, governments should implement programs that educate citizens on evaluating online information critically.
6. Strengthen cybersecurity and risk management. Protecting official accounts from hacking, impersonation, or disinformation attacks is crucial to maintaining credibility.

Future Research Directions

While this study focused on Minahasa, future research could adopt a comparative approach across multiple regions in Indonesia or Southeast Asia. Mixed methods—combining surveys, big data analytics of social media engagement, and qualitative interviews—would provide deeper insights into the relationship between digital governance and public trust. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could examine how trust evolves over time in response to specific policy crises or reforms.

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