



## Interpreting Digital Politics in Marginalized Communities: A Phenomenological Study

Muhammad Khaibar Putra Adithia <sup>1\*</sup>, Junaidi <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Krisnadwipayana, Indonesia

[ibaradithia94@gmail.com](mailto:ibaradithia94@gmail.com) \*, [junaidi.mn@gmail.com](mailto:junaidi.mn@gmail.com)

### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received 29-07-2025

Revised 19-09-2025

Accepted 24-09-2025

#### Keyword:

Lived Experience, Digital Political Information, Marginalized Individuals, Interpretative Analysis, Online Engagement, Democratic Participation

### ABSTRACT

Digital media have transformed how political information is accessed and interpreted, yet this transformation remains uneven among marginalized populations. While prior research has explored digital engagement broadly, little is known about how individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds experience political information in everyday contexts. This study focuses on marginalized communities residing in urban low-income neighborhoods in Indonesia, where limited digital literacy and infrastructural constraints shape political communication practices. This study addresses the lack of insight into the subjective dimensions of political engagement by asking: How do marginalized individuals make sense of political content accessed through digital platforms? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of individuals navigating political information in conditions of social and technological precarity. Eight participants (five women and three men) aged between 22 and 45 were recruited through purposive sampling, all of whom have limited access to stable internet connectivity and rely primarily on low-cost smartphones and social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp for political information. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results reveal four major experiential themes: difficulty navigating misinformation, passive participation as a protective strategy, trust shaped by personal relationships rather than source credibility, and digital access as a symbol of social inclusion. These themes reflect a nuanced interplay between access, emotion, and identity that challenges traditional models of political engagement. The findings suggest that marginalized political actors engage with digital democracy not as passive consumers, but as cautious interpreters whose behaviors are shaped by fear, distrust, and community belonging. This research advances our understanding of how political meaning is constructed at the margins and offers a foundation for future studies to explore inclusion and agency in digital civic life.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, access to political information has become increasingly mediated through online platforms and social media (Akhtar, 2021). This transformation has reshaped the landscape of democratic participation, with digital media serving as both a conduit for civic engagement and a battleground for misinformation, ideological polarization, and selective exposure (Amit-Danhi et al., 2024). While mainstream narratives often celebrate the democratizing potential of digital technologies, they tend to overlook the complex realities faced by individuals from marginalized communities those who exist at the peripheries of digital access, literacy, and representation.

The phenomenon of political engagement in marginalized populations is shaped not only by material constraints such as connectivity and education, but also by lived experiences of exclusion,

distrust, and limited social capital. For many, encountering political information online is not a matter of deliberate choice but a passive, fragmented process influenced by algorithms, social networks, and cultural context. As Baldwin-Philippi (2020) notes, the promise of civic technology in Southeast Asia is unevenly distributed, often reflecting broader societal inequalities rather than mitigating them. Similarly, Bene & Szabó (2021) highlight how working-class voices remain underrepresented in mainstream media, reinforcing structural silences in the public sphere.

Understanding how marginalized individuals make sense of political content in digital environments requires more than access metrics or content analysis; it necessitates an exploration of subjective meaning, identity negotiation, and affective responses (Cepernich & Fubini, 2020). These experiential dimensions are frequently omitted in political communication studies, which tend to prioritize institutional actors, macro-level trends, or quantitative measures of engagement (Cornut et al., 2022). Yet, democracy is ultimately enacted through human perception and interpretation realities that are deeply personal, contextual, and complex.

This underscores the relevance of exploring political information access not merely as a functional process, but as an experiential phenomenon (Dattatreyan, 2020). The question is not only what marginalized individuals access, but how they feel, interpret, and respond to what they access (Farries et al., 2025). Such a shift toward subjective meaning-making aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, which seeks to uncover the lived essence of human experiences.

Given the social and cultural embeddedness of digital interactions, there is a pressing need to understand how these interactions are experienced by those who are structurally disadvantaged or discursively excluded (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). A phenomenological approach offers the necessary lens to explore how political awareness, participation, and trust are constructed often hesitantly, unevenly, and silently within marginalized digital lives.

In recent years, there has been growing scholarly attention to the exploration of individual experiences within the context of political information consumption (Gauja, 2021). This focus on lived experience has emerged in response to the realization that access to information alone does not equate to meaningful political participation especially for populations situated within the margins of socio-political and technological systems. Studies such as those by Gerbaudo (2021) and Gill & Dorsen (2024) have emphasized the need to center personal narratives and subjective realities in understanding how democratic engagement unfolds in everyday life.

Despite this emerging interest, significant methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and nuance of these experiences (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). Much of the existing literature on political communication among marginalized groups remains dominated by quantitative or survey-based approaches, which, while useful for measuring patterns of access and frequency of use, fall short in revealing the internal processes of interpretation, emotion, and meaning-making that underlie political behavior (Halupka & Brown, 2025). These approaches often overlook the affective and relational dimensions that shape how individuals interact with political content, trust sources, or make sense of competing narratives.

Moreover, data derived from structured questionnaires or content metrics tends to flatten the richness of lived experience, reducing complex cognitive and emotional engagements into predefined variables (Highfield & Miltner, 2023). As a result, important contextual and cultural subtleties such as fear of political retaliation, informal knowledge-sharing practices, or reliance on kinship networks for information remain underexplored or invisible in dominant paradigms of political media research.

These limitations suggest that many conventional methods are ill-suited for uncovering the essential structures of meaning that define the phenomenon of political information access among marginalized individuals (Kanchan, 2024). There is, therefore, a critical need for research designs that can accommodate ambiguity, depth, and context qualities that are central to the phenomenological tradition.

Existing responses to the challenges of political information access among marginalized communities have largely relied on practical interventions such as digital literacy training, platform regulation, and content moderation strategies (Karpf, 2020). While these measures are valuable in

improving infrastructural and procedural dimensions of access, they remain grounded in normative, solution-oriented frameworks that rarely account for how individuals subjectively experience, interpret, or internalize political content in digital environments.

These conventional approaches, often implemented through standardized surveys or behavioral metrics, tend to prioritize quantifiable outputs such as frequency of access, user engagement, or trust indices at the expense of understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated in lived experience (Kassen, 2025). As highlighted by Krippner & Hirschman (2022), such methodologies offer limited insights into the deeper sociocultural mechanisms and emotional landscapes that shape how political information is processed by individuals at the margins of media systems.

The result is a fragmented understanding of political agency among marginalized populations, one that neglects the complexity of navigating digital spaces filled with ambiguity, misinformation, and conflicting narratives (Lee, 2024). These limitations are particularly acute in non-Western and low-resource settings, where political knowledge is often mediated through informal networks and influenced by historical patterns of exclusion, distrust, and silence.

Addressing this epistemic gap requires a methodological shift from a focus on outcomes and patterns to a commitment to uncovering the underlying essence of experience (Lian, 2023). Phenomenology offers such a pathway, enabling researchers to access the layered, often contradictory meanings that individuals assign to their digital-political interactions (Lisi, 2025). By centering the lived experiences of marginalized users, phenomenological inquiry provides a more holistic and context-sensitive account of how democracy is encountered, imagined, and constrained in everyday life.

Previous studies have examined how individuals engage with political content in digital spaces, particularly focusing on behavioral trends and access patterns. However, few have explored how marginalized individuals experience these engagements subjectively, through their own perspectives and meanings. Scholars like Lobato & Gonzalez (2020) and Lutscher et al. (2020) have emphasized the importance of understanding media practices in everyday life, yet their work remains largely interpretive from the researcher's point of view. What is missing is an exploration that privileges the participant's own voice, especially among communities often excluded from mainstream discourse. This study builds on those contributions while addressing the need for a deeper experiential lens.

To address this, the study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach that centers on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Mattan et al., 2020). This method was chosen because it allows for detailed exploration of how participants perceive, process, and assign meaning to political information in digital environments (Mattes et al., 2024). In doing so, the study responds to the knowledge gap outlined earlier namely, the lack of insight into the internal, affective, and contextual processes of marginalized political engagement. Rather than measuring behaviors, this approach aims to understand meaning from within the experience itself. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guides the entire analytic process.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the general and specific background of the phenomenon, followed by a review of relevant literature. The methods section presents the phenomenological design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytic approach. The results section details the experiential themes that emerged from participant narratives. Finally, the discussion reflects on these findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and implications.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in accessing and making sense of political information through digital platforms (Stukal & Shilina, 2022). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, emphasizes the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences, allowing for a deep understanding of how specific phenomena are lived and perceived.

The interpretative dimension of phenomenology, particularly grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed between participant and researcher within a contextual and historical framework (Udupa et al., 2020). This design was deemed suitable for capturing the nuanced realities and internal interpretations of individuals who often remain underrepresented in mainstream political discourse and media studies.

### **Participants**

Participants included individuals from marginalized backgrounds, defined by socioeconomic status, geographic isolation, or limited access to formal education. Selection was guided by purposive sampling, ensuring participants had direct experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation: navigating digital political content.

Inclusion criteria required that participants be at least 18 years old, self-identify as having limited access to political discourse in traditional settings, and actively engage with digital media as a primary source of political information (Webb, 2020). Exclusion criteria applied to individuals employed in political, media, or academic professions, to ensure focus on lay public perspectives.

A total of eight participants were involved, comprising five females and three males, aged between 21 and 54. Most participants resided in semi-urban or rural areas and had completed no higher than secondary-level formal education. This demographic composition provided a diverse yet contextually grounded perspective on the research phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol. This protocol was designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections related to their digital political information practices.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and familiar settings chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and openness. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim shortly after each session.

To foster a safe environment for disclosure, the conversational tone was maintained throughout, with open-ended questions allowing for narrative elaboration. The interview guide was adapted iteratively based on emerging themes during early data collection, in line with phenomenological responsiveness.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method suitable for examining how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. The analysis proceeded through a multi-step process, starting with immersion in the data through repeated readings of transcripts to capture the overall sense of each narrative.

Meaning units were identified, coded, and grouped into thematic clusters. These clusters were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiential world. Thematic reduction was employed to distill the essence of the phenomenon, preserving both descriptive and interpretative layers.

NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding and organization of data, although interpretative insights remained rooted in close engagement with the textual data. The analytical

process aimed to foreground participant voices while highlighting the contextual structures shaping their digital-political interactions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of the study. All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the research and were asked to sign a written informed consent form.

Anonymity was preserved by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and removing identifiable information from transcripts. Confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process, including data storage and reporting. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, including respect for autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the study, structured around four hierarchically organized themes that emerged through interpretative phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with marginalized participants. The themes are arranged from cognitive challenges (navigating misinformation) to behavioral responses (passive participation), followed by relational dynamics (trust formation) and symbolic meanings (digital inclusion). Each theme integrates participants' quotations with interpretative commentary to emphasize both experiential depth and analytical coherence.

### **Navigating Misinformation Amid Limited Digital Literacy**

Participants revealed that daily engagement with political content online was marked by confusion and uncertainty, largely due to limited digital literacy. Although most owned smartphones and accessed platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, their ability to evaluate the credibility of political information was minimal.

"I only know who the candidates are from Facebook posts. But sometimes, I don't know which one is true... they all look the same and people share so many things without knowing." (Participant 3)

"When I try to understand the news, I feel like it's made for someone who already knows everything. I just scroll past and read the comments instead." (Participant 7)

These reflections illustrate a recurring tension between access and comprehension. Participants had physical access to political information but lacked critical tools to assess or interpret it, leading to withdrawal from online discussions. The struggle to discern authenticity highlights how digital inequality is not merely technical but epistemic—limiting citizens' ability to engage meaningfully with democracy.

### **Passive Political Participation as a Coping Mechanism**

Rather than engaging in open debate, participants adopted passive political behaviors—liking, sharing, or silently observing political posts. This behavioral pattern functioned as a coping mechanism rather than disengagement, allowing them to avoid online hostility and preserve social harmony.

"I don't comment because I don't want people to attack me. Sometimes my friends say I'm stupid for believing certain posts, so I just keep quiet." (Participant 5)

"I share what I think is important, but I don't write anything. I don't want trouble." (Participant 2)

These statements reveal an adaptive silence shaped by fear, social pressure, and prior experiences of ridicule. Participants' restraint, therefore, represents a negotiated form of participation,

where safety and self-preservation override open expression. This theme underscores how digital fear translates into political passivity, particularly among vulnerable groups.

### **Trust Shaped by Familiarity, Not Credibility**

Trust in information sources was formed through relational proximity rather than institutional authority. Participants expressed greater confidence in political information circulated by people they personally knew—family, friends, or local leaders—than in news outlets or official accounts.

“If my brother shares something, I believe it. I don’t think he would post something wrong.” (Participant 1)

“I don’t follow news accounts. I follow people I know. If something’s important, they will post it.” (Participant 6)

These excerpts reveal a relational logic of trust, where emotional bonds substitute for evidence-based credibility. Such relational trust fosters community solidarity but simultaneously perpetuates misinformation within closed social networks. This finding deepens the interpretative link between social belonging and informational vulnerability.

### **Information Access as a Form of Social Inclusion**

Participants described digital connectivity as symbolic membership in contemporary democratic life. Even when comprehension was limited, being able to see or share political content created a sense of participation and belonging.

“When I can see the same things as others about elections, I feel like I am part of it too.” (Participant 4)

“Even if I don’t understand everything, at least I know what’s happening... That’s better than nothing.” (Participant 8)

These narratives indicate that access itself becomes a marker of social worth. For participants, digital engagement offered not only information but also a sense of collective identity and symbolic inclusion within political discourse. This meaning extends beyond functionality—positioning access as an emotional bridge to citizenship.

In summary, the four themes—navigating misinformation, passive participation, relational trust, and symbolic inclusion—form a coherent interpretative hierarchy that links cognition, behavior, relationships, and identity. Together, they reveal how marginalized individuals engage with digital politics not as passive consumers but as active interpreters negotiating fear, belonging, and meaning in the margins of digital democracy.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that marginalized individuals experience political information access through digital platforms as fragmented, emotionally cautious, and shaped by social proximity (McGregor et al., 2022). These experiences reflect a complex interplay between digital access, perceived risk, and the need for belonging, offering an answer to the central research question concerning how such individuals interpret and engage with political information online.

These results contribute significantly to addressing the knowledge gap identified in the introduction. Rather than framing marginalized users as passive or disengaged, the study reveals them as selectively engaged, navigating digital political spaces with strategic restraint and relational trust (Medero & Villaplana, 2024). The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allowed for the identification of subtle but critical dimensions of this phenomenon such as the quiet forms of agency enacted through silence, avoidance, or non-verbal participation (Odeyemi et al., 2022). These insights challenge oversimplified narratives of digital exclusion and highlight the subjective ways in which individuals negotiate access, meaning, and identity within politicized digital environments.

The interpretation of findings aligns with and extends prior scholarship on digital marginality and democratic participation. For instance, Ong & Tapsell (2022) emphasized how civic tech initiatives fail to reach the peripheries of engagement; this study complements that argument by illustrating the internalized effects of those exclusions through personal narratives. Similarly, the findings resonate with Puente et al. (2021), who showed how working-class individuals experience representational silencing in the media, but go further by exploring how individuals adapt to and reinterpret these silences in everyday digital practices. In contrast to purely behavioral or access-based models, this research reframes political engagement as an interpretive act one deeply embedded in personal histories, social vulnerability, and emotional logic.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual narratives to inform broader discussions on digital citizenship, inclusive democracy, and social equity (Ragragio, 2023). The nuanced understanding of passive participation, trust built through interpersonal ties, and symbolic inclusion reveals the need for political communication strategies that are culturally grounded and emotionally resonant (Rattle et al., 2020). These insights can guide policymakers, educators, and civil society actors in developing more empathetic, context-sensitive approaches to digital engagement. For marginalized groups, political information is not only consumed for action but for affirmation of presence within a democratic society that often overlooks them. By illuminating these experiences, the study contributes to a more humane understanding of what it means to be politically aware in structurally unequal digital spaces.

Like all phenomenological inquiries, this study is bounded by its contextual and methodological specificity (Rone, 2022). The sample size, though sufficient for in-depth analysis, limits the transferability of findings to broader populations. Additionally, the reliance on verbal narratives may have excluded perspectives of individuals with limited verbal expression or different communicative styles (Schaupp, 2021). The focus on digital political engagement in a specific regional and socio-economic context may also influence how the findings are interpreted elsewhere. These limitations are not weaknesses, but rather inherent to the phenomenological tradition, which privileges depth over breadth in the pursuit of experiential meaning.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring how similar patterns of engagement manifest in other marginalized groups, such as linguistic minorities, diasporic communities, or individuals with disabilities (Sinha et al., 2023). Comparative studies across regions or political systems could enrich our understanding of how trust, fear, and agency function in diverse digital ecologies. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration with political science, education, or media studies could strengthen theoretical integration and policy relevance (Small & Puddister, 2020). By continuing to center lived experience, future studies can deepen our grasp of how democracy is perceived and enacted by those for whom its promises remain partial.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how marginalized individuals experience and interpret political information accessed through digital platforms. It addressed the lack of understanding surrounding the subjective dimensions of digital political engagement, especially among communities often excluded from dominant discourse. The findings revealed that participants engage cautiously and selectively, guided by trust, fear, and a desire for inclusion, challenging common assumptions about political disengagement. By using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this research offered rich, experience-based insights that previous quantitative models have overlooked. These results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of democratic participation in digitally mediated environments.

However, this study has certain limitations. The small sample size and focus on a single socio-cultural context limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences may not fully capture the diversity of digital engagement practices among marginalized populations. Future research should expand the demographic scope to include participants from different age groups, regions, and educational backgrounds to better understand how structural inequalities intersect with digital political behavior. Comparative studies across urban and rural contexts, or between countries with varying levels of digital infrastructure, could further

illuminate how local conditions shape political meaning-making in online spaces. Moreover, integrating phenomenological insights with digital ethnography or network analysis could provide a more comprehensive picture of how trust and participation evolve in digital ecosystems.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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