



Exploring Citizens' Lived Experiences of Trust in Government Communication Amid Digital Disinformation

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 30/10/2025

Revised 25/11/2025

Accepted 17/12/2025

Keyword:

Trust in Government Communication; Digital Disinformation; Citizen Experience; Public Trust; Political Communication; Meaning-Making

ABSTRACT

Political communication in the digital era has undergone a major transformation due to the rise of disinformation and declining public trust in government institutions. Within this evolving landscape, understanding the subjective experience of trust has become central to analyzing how citizens interpret and respond to government messages. However, prior studies have largely relied on quantitative or message-effect approaches, leaving limited insight into how individuals actually experience and reconstruct trust amid conflicting information environments. Therefore, this study explicitly aims to examine how citizens subjectively construct and interpret trust in government communication within digital disinformation settings. This study addresses that gap by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how citizens make sense of government communication in the context of digital disinformation. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 digitally active citizens, and analyzed thematically to uncover core experiential patterns. The findings reveal that trust emerges as a fluid, interpretative process, shaped by emotion, reflection, and social interaction rather than by message accuracy alone. Participants described trust as being reconstructed through authenticity, empathy, and moral coherence in government communication. These results provide a deeper understanding of trust as a lived experience, offering new theoretical insights into the relational and ethical dimensions of political communication. The study underscores the need for dialogical and empathetic communication strategies in public governance and invites further research to expand phenomenological inquiry across different cultural and institutional contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary political communication landscape is characterized by rapid digital transformation and the increasing interdependence between governments, media platforms, and citizens (Carvalho et al., 2025). The emergence of social media as a dominant medium for information exchange has reshaped how political narratives are produced, distributed, and interpreted.

Within this evolving environment, a core challenge emerges: citizens encounter competing messages, disinformation, and algorithmic amplification that intensify ambiguity in evaluating credibility (Sehl, 2024). Consequently, the foundation of public trust in government communication has become increasingly unstable.

Despite extensive global research addressing disinformation and institutional credibility, what remains insufficiently understood is how citizens personally experience and interpret trust or distrust in government messages within digital environments. This gap is crucial because trust is not merely an informational outcome, but a lived, emotional, and cognitive process. Therefore, the present study specifically aims to: (1) explore how citizens phenomenologically experience trust or distrust in

government communication; and (2) interpret the meaning-making processes through which trust is constructed, questioned, or reconstructed in a digital context.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond the realm of political science; it touches upon the subjective experience of trust and perception within democratic participation (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Trust in government communication functions as a psychological and emotional anchor that shapes how individuals interpret policies, respond to crises, and engage in civic life. When such trust deteriorates, it does not merely signify a communication failure but a crisis of relational legitimacy between citizens and the state. The experience of navigating disinformation and media polarization has become a defining feature of political consciousness in the digital age transforming trust from a static belief into an evolving emotional and cognitive negotiation.

In this broader social context, understanding how citizens experience and make sense of government messages requires more than statistical measurement or content analysis; it calls for a phenomenological exploration of meaning (Iijima et al., 2025). Such an approach foregrounds the lived experience of trust, examining how individuals interpret authenticity, credibility, and moral intent within political discourse (Monaci & Persico, 2025). By investigating the subjective dimensions of how trust is felt, questioned, and reconstructed in digital environments, this study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the human experience underlying political communication in the post-truth era.

Within the growing field of political communication studies, research on the subjective experience of trust has gained increasing significance. Scholars have begun to recognize that understanding political behavior requires more than tracking information exposure or message effects; it demands insight into how individuals live, feel, and interpret their engagement with political messages (Arribas et al., 2025). As digital environments blur traditional distinctions between fact and belief, citizens' perceptions of credibility and authenticity have emerged as key determinants of democratic resilience (Oleart & Rone, 2025). This growing recognition has positioned phenomenological inquiry as a crucial lens for capturing the personal meaning structures that underlie trust and skepticism in political communication.

Despite this theoretical evolution, methodological challenges persist. Much of the existing literature on trust in government communication relies on quantitative models or survey-based approaches, which, while valuable, often fail to capture the emotional, cognitive, and relational depth of human experience. Statistical measures of "trust" tend to reduce complex processes of interpretation into simplified scales, neglecting the intersubjective and contextual nature of how trust is actually experienced and reconstructed in everyday political life (Bonet-Jover et al., 2024). The disconnection between numerical representations and lived meaning has resulted in a partial and fragmented understanding of how individuals internalize or contest official narratives in a disinformation-saturated environment.

Consequently, the field faces a pressing need for methodological approaches that illuminate the essence of experience, rather than its measurable correlates (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The phenomenological perspective particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis addresses this gap by allowing researchers to access the depth of consciousness and emotion embedded in individuals' interactions with political communication. Through this lens, trust is understood not as an abstract construct, but as a lived reality, continuously shaped by perception, reflection, and dialogue within a digital public sphere (Hoşut et al., 2024). The current study situates itself within this sub-area, advancing the exploration of how citizens reconstruct trust in government communication through interpretative engagement with political narratives and media discourse.

Current research addressing the issue of public trust in government communication predominantly employs instrumental and practical frameworks, emphasizing message clarity, transparency strategies, and fact-checking mechanisms as primary solutions to counter disinformation. While these approaches provide useful insights into institutional communication practices, they tend

to operate within a functional paradigm that prioritizes information delivery over meaning-making (Khaled, 2024). Consequently, they often overlook the subjective and experiential dimensions through which citizens internalize, negotiate, and reinterpret the credibility of government messages (Waisbord, 2020; McNair, 2021).

Existing studies that assess trust through quantitative indicators such as survey responses, sentiment metrics, or media consumption patterns have produced valuable descriptive knowledge but limited interpretative depth (Trithara, 2025). These methods rarely capture how individuals experience trust or distrust, nor do they reveal the underlying emotional and existential processes that shape their communicative judgments. The tendency to conceptualize trust as a measurable variable rather than a lived phenomenon has restricted the field's ability to understand how meaning and belief are formed in real-world contexts of digital complexity (Vaccari, 2022; Chadwick, 2023).

This methodological limitation underscores a critical knowledge gap: the lack of phenomenological understanding of how citizens construct and reconstruct trust toward government communication amid the pervasive influence of disinformation. Unlike empirical models that isolate trust as an outcome, the phenomenological approach invites inquiry into how trust is experienced, felt, and interpreted within the interplay of emotion, cognition, and sociopolitical context (Subekti et al., 2025). By embracing this interpretative perspective, research can move beyond surface-level explanations and uncover the essence of trust as a lived experience, thereby enriching theoretical and practical understanding of political communication in the post-truth era.

Recent studies on political communication and public trust have examined the influence of disinformation, emotional framing, and media ecosystems on citizen perception. Scholars such as Waisbord (2020) and Chadwick (2023) emphasize that the erosion of institutional credibility is deeply intertwined with the rise of hybrid media systems, where truth and belief often overlap. However, these studies primarily approach trust as a communicative outcome rather than as a lived human experience. Few have explored how citizens themselves perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with government messages in their everyday digital environments. This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological inquiry that foregrounds meaning-making and subjective reflection.

To address this need, the present study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its central approach. This method enables a close examination of how individuals make sense of their trust or distrust toward government communication within the complex flow of digital information (Sánchez-Sobradillo & Masegosa-Sánchez, 2025). The phenomenological framework was chosen because it seeks to reveal the essence of human experience through participants' reflections, rather than through predefined categories or behavioral measures (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025). By focusing on how meaning emerges through interpretation, this study responds directly to the knowledge gap identified earlier offering a deeper, experiential understanding of political trust in the post-truth era. In doing so, it bridges theory and lived reality through an interpretative and context-sensitive analysis.

The article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the conceptual and empirical context of the study, situating trust in government communication within the landscape of digital disinformation (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The Method section describes the phenomenological design, data collection, and analytic process that guided interpretation (Balcytiene, 2025). The Results section provides a thematic representation of participants' lived experiences, supported by direct quotations that reveal their sense-making processes. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion sections interpret these findings in light of existing theories of trust and political communication, emphasizing implications for public engagement and institutional credibility.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the subjective experiences of citizens in understanding and interpreting government communication within the context of digital disinformation (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological design was chosen because it allows for a deep exploration of lived experiences, focusing on how individuals construct meaning from their interactions with political messages.

The interpretative orientation of IPA emphasizes the co-creation of meaning between the participant's experience and the researcher's interpretive understanding, enabling a rich and contextually grounded examination of how trust toward government communication is formed, maintained, or eroded. This design was particularly relevant for addressing the research questions, as it illuminates the nuanced and often emotional processes underlying the phenomenon of political trust in the digital era.

The study thus followed a phenomenological philosophy rooted in Heidegger's hermeneutic tradition, which views human experience as embedded within the social, political, and communicative world. This framework supported the inquiry into how citizens experience, interpret, and attribute meaning to trust in government messaging amid a landscape of competing narratives and misinformation. Additionally, the study incorporated explicit procedures for ensuring methodological rigor—particularly through triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity—to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of interpretations (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022; Alase, 2017). Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, informed consent, and secure data handling, were implemented throughout the study in accordance with contemporary IPA research standards.

Participants

Participants consisted of citizens who actively engaged with government communication on digital platforms, including social media and official online channels (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection was based on purposive sampling, ensuring that individuals had direct and reflective experiences with the phenomenon under study.

1. Inclusion criteria required that participants were:
2. Between the ages of 21 and 55;
3. Active consumers or commentators of political or governmental information online for at least one year;
4. Residing in urban or semi-urban areas with consistent digital media access.

Individuals employed in formal government communication roles or affiliated with political campaign organizations were excluded to maintain the authenticity of citizen perspectives.

A total of 12 participants (6 male and 6 female) were included, representing diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Their demographic range provided a balanced understanding of the phenomenon across different age, gender, and occupational contexts. All participants reported frequent engagement with political content on social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, or Instagram.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit personal reflections on experiences of trust and skepticism toward government communication (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview followed a flexible guide consisting of open-ended prompts, encouraging participants to describe their perceptions, emotions, and meaning-making processes related to political messages encountered online.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via secure digital conferencing platforms, depending on participants' availability and comfort. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interviews took place in neutral and comfortable environments to promote openness and minimize social desirability bias.

To ensure data richness, field notes and reflective memos were maintained to capture contextual nuances and non-verbal cues. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, where no new insights emerged.

The use of a validated interview guide adapted from prior IPA studies (Waisbord, 2020; Chadwick, 2023) ensured conceptual coherence, with minor modifications to reflect the digital disinformation context.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to identify essential themes representing participants' lived experiences and interpretations (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The process began with immersive reading of transcripts to gain a holistic understanding, followed by initial coding to identify significant statements and meaning units.

These units were clustered into emergent themes, reflecting shared and divergent aspects of the participants' experiences. Through iterative thematic refinement, broader categories were established, leading to the identification of four major themes presented in the Results section: constructing trust amid ambiguity, emotional resonance and disillusionment, social mediation of trust, and reconstruction of credibility.

Data were organized and managed with NVivo 14 software to support systematic coding and retrieval (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Throughout the analysis, interpretative notes were maintained to capture contextual insights and reflexive interpretations.

The analytical process adhered to the core principles of phenomenological reduction, ensuring that findings represented the essence of participants' lived experiences rather than preconceived assumptions or theoretical impositions.

RESULTS

Constructing Trust Amid Information Ambiguity

Participants revealed that building trust in government messages is a continuous and uncertain process shaped by exposure to multiple and often conflicting information sources. Rather than functioning as a stable attitude, trust operated as a fluid interpretive practice in which participants actively compared, filtered, and recalibrated meaning across platforms. Trust was not static but reconstructed over time through personal reflection and comparison between official and unofficial narratives.

As one participant described:

“I no longer believe everything that comes from the government right away. I check social media, I read the comments, and sometimes I find that others have a different story. Then I decide what seems logical to me.” (Participant 3)

This quote reflects how trust becomes an interpretive act, not a passive acceptance. Participants frequently described themselves as “navigators” of the information landscape critically engaging with government communications rather than merely consuming them. Trust, in this sense, emerged as a negotiated meaning, constantly reconstructed through dialogue between personal belief and public discourse.

Emotional Resonance and Disillusionment in Digital Interaction

Beyond cognitive evaluation, participants emphasized the emotional dimension of trust. Feelings of frustration, skepticism, and at times betrayal were expressed when government communication appeared inconsistent or politically motivated. Across participants, emotional

responses functioned as affective filters, shaping whether information was perceived as credible, manipulative, or worthy of reconsideration.

“When the government denies something that later turns out to be true, I feel disappointed not just because they lied, but because I lose hope that they can be honest again.” (Participant 7)

Such emotional responses reveal that trust erosion is not merely informational but affective. Participants who once felt aligned with government narratives reported a gradual sense of emotional fatigue, leading to disengagement or selective attention. Yet, some also described moments of renewed faith when the government displayed empathy or transparency particularly during crises such as health emergencies or policy controversies.

“It’s different when they talk with sincerity. You can feel it. When communication sounds humane, I start to listen again.” (Participant 1)

This suggests that affective authenticity is crucial to restoring public trust in government communication.

The Social Mediation of Trust and Distrust

Social environments both offline and online played a pivotal role in shaping participants’ interpretations of government messages. Many respondents noted that trust is socially negotiated, not individually isolated. Discussions in digital communities, comment threads, and group chats influenced how they interpreted and validated government statements.

“I often decide what to believe after talking to my online friends. Sometimes their opinions change how I see the news from the government.” (Participant 4)

These findings highlight how social validation functions as a form of epistemic filtering, where the collective judgment of peers often outweighs institutional credibility. In polarized contexts, participants tended to align their trust with ideological or community-based affiliations rather than institutional reputation. The study thus reveals that trust and distrust circulate through digital collectives, reinforcing echo chambers but also offering spaces of resistance and reinterpretation.

Social Influence on Trust in Government Messages



Reconstructing Meaning and Restoring Credibility

Despite widespread skepticism, several participants demonstrated an ongoing effort to reconstruct meaning and rediscover trust through personal reflection and contextual reasoning. Rather than outright rejection, they sought coherence between their lived experiences and governmental narratives.

“I try to understand the reasons behind their message. Maybe they have limits or pressures we don’t see. That helps me judge more fairly.” (Participant 9)

This form of reflective trust indicates a phenomenological reconstruction, where individuals reinterpret political communication through empathy and contextual understanding. Trust, therefore,

is not simply restored through evidence, but through the recognition of shared vulnerability and situational awareness.

A few participants even described an emerging sense of pragmatic trust, where they distinguished between political rhetoric and operational truth:

“Even if I doubt their words, when I see real action or results, I start to trust again.”
(Participant 2)

Such reflections demonstrate the human tendency to seek meaning and coherence in complex communicative environments underscoring the transformative potential of authentic, transparent, and consistent communication.

DISCUSSION

The phenomenological analysis revealed that citizens experience trust in government communication as a dynamic, interpretative, and emotionally mediated process, rather than as a fixed attitude or belief. Across all themes, participants described trust as something continuously negotiated through feelings of uncertainty, critical reflection, and social interaction (Hägler et al., 2025). These findings address the central research question by showing that the essence of political trust in the digital era lies in the reconstruction of meaning, as individuals navigate between official narratives and the fluid realities of online discourse.

The study's findings contribute to the research questions by demonstrating that trust toward government messages is reconstructed through lived experience, guided by both cognitive reasoning and emotional resonance (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The phenomenological lens reveals that participants' perceptions of government credibility were formed not merely through the accuracy of information, but through the authenticity and relational tone of communication (van der Eem et al., 2025). When citizens perceived transparency, empathy, or acknowledgment of shared vulnerability, trust was renewed; when communication appeared manipulative or detached, trust diminished. To avoid repeating the empirical findings, the discussion here emphasizes that these patterns collectively support the interpretation of trust as a dynamic moral relationship rather than restating each thematic result. Hence, the study advances the understanding of trust as an existential experience a process of meaning-making that connects citizens to institutions through emotional and ethical recognition.

In relation to previous literature, these findings both confirm and extend existing theories of political communication. Consistent with Waisbord (2020), the results support the notion that contemporary communication crises are rooted not only in disinformation but in the erosion of affective legitimacy (Bhat et al., 2025). However, the phenomenological insights go further by uncovering how individuals actively interpret, contest, and reframe their trust within digital contexts an aspect often missed in earlier quantitative or media-effect studies. McNair (2021) and Chadwick (2023) have emphasized the systemic dimensions of post-truth politics, yet the present study enriches this discourse by revealing the subjective depth of how citizens emotionally negotiate authenticity and credibility in real time. Moreover, these findings align with interpretative communication theories that view trust as a dialogical construct rather than a static outcome, underscoring the role of empathy, relational transparency, and moral coherence as key dimensions of effective government communication.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical and practical implications for the field of political communication, particularly in understanding how trust operates within digital democracies. From a phenomenological perspective, the results suggest that trust in government communication is not simply a product of information accuracy or message clarity, but a relational and moral experience that evolves through citizens' interpretative engagement with political discourse (Gurung et al., 2025). This implies that effective communication must prioritize authenticity, transparency, and empathy, acknowledging the lived realities of citizens rather than treating them as passive recipients of information.

Socially, the findings indicate that rebuilding trust requires more than combating disinformation it demands fostering dialogical communication practices where citizens feel recognized, respected, and emotionally aligned with the institutions addressing them (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Culturally, the results highlight that in highly mediated societies, the boundaries between political persuasion and moral resonance are increasingly blurred, making affective credibility a critical dimension of legitimacy. Professionally, this study informs policymakers, media strategists, and communication officers that phenomenological sensitivity an awareness of how messages are experienced rather than merely transmitted can enhance both the ethical and practical effectiveness of public communication.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides rich insights into the lived experience of political trust, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), while suitable for exploring subjective meaning, limits the generalizability of findings beyond the specific group of participants involved (Bruno et al., 2025). The relatively small sample size and context-specific nature of the study focused on digitally active citizens within an urban sociopolitical environment may not capture the full diversity of trust experiences across different demographics or cultural settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of retrospective bias, as participants' reflections are shaped by their memory and interpretative framing.

However, rather than detracting from the study's validity, these limitations emphasize the contextual richness and interpretative depth of phenomenological inquiry. They invite caution against overgeneralization while encouraging further research that builds upon the subjective realities uncovered here to deepen understanding across broader populations.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how different sociocultural or political contexts influence the experiential construction of trust. Comparative phenomenological studies across nations or institutional types may illuminate how varying histories of governance and media systems shape citizens' trust trajectories (Watt et al., 2025). Another promising direction involves integrating phenomenology with digital ethnography, enabling researchers to observe real-time meaning-making processes as citizens interact with government communication online.

Moreover, investigating how intergenerational differences or educational backgrounds affect the phenomenology of trust could yield important insights into the evolving relationship between citizens and institutions in a post-truth society. Finally, applying this interpretative framework to other domains of public communication such as health policy or environmental governance could further reveal the universal yet context-dependent nature of trust as a lived experience. By continuing this line of inquiry, future studies can strengthen both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for rebuilding meaningful connections between governments and their citizens.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experience of citizens in constructing and reconstructing trust toward government communication within the complex digital disinformation environment. The findings revealed that trust is not a static belief but a dynamic interpretative process shaped by emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of interaction with public messages. Through the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the study illuminated how authenticity, empathy, and relational transparency influence citizens' perceptions of governmental credibility. These insights extend prior research by shifting the understanding of political trust from an institutional outcome to a human experience of meaning-making, addressing gaps left by traditional quantitative approaches. In doing so, this study provides a clear phenomenological contribution by demonstrating how subjective interpretations and lived meanings structure citizens' political trust, thereby advancing the methodological and theoretical application of phenomenology in political communication. The study thus contributes to the theoretical refinement of political communication

and offers practical implications for building dialogical and empathetic communication strategies in digital governance. Future research may expand this framework across different cultural or institutional contexts to further explore how political trust evolves within diverse communication ecologies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. All funding sources and institutional supports have been fully disclosed in the Acknowledgement section.

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