

The Contribution Of Social Media (Instagram) To Voting Decisions With Public Trust As A Moderating Variable

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Abstract

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have transformed political communication and voter engagement in contemporary democracies. However, the extent to which digital exposure translates into concrete electoral decisions remains contingent on underlying psychological and institutional factors. This study examines the influence of Instagram usage intensity on voting decisions among residents of Malang City, Indonesia, and evaluates the moderating role of public trust in this relationship. Employing a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 400 registered voters using validated scales for Instagram intensity, voting decisions, and public trust. Simple linear regression and Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA) were utilized to test direct and conditional effects. The initial model revealed a minimal direct effect of Instagram intensity on voting decisions ($R^2 = 0.000$). However, introducing public trust as a moderator significantly enhanced the model's explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.039$, $F = 7.170$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that the relationship between digital political exposure and electoral choice is conditional. Public trust functions as an amplifying mechanism, strengthening the translation of Instagram-based political content into informed voting preferences. These findings challenge deterministic media-effects paradigms by demonstrating that social media's electoral influence is activated within high-trust environments. Practically, political strategists and electoral

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commissions should integrate trust-building initiatives with digital campaigning to foster rational voter participation. The study contributes to digital political communication literature by positioning institutional trust as a critical boundary condition in contemporary electoral behavior.

Keywords: Instagram usage intensity; public trust; voting decisions

INTRODUCTION

General elections serve as the cornerstone of democratic systems, embodying the principle of popular sovereignty where citizens exercise their constitutional right to determine leadership and public policy (Harianja et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024). In representative democracies such as Indonesia, electoral participation is not merely a procedural obligation but a fundamental mechanism for translating collective will into legitimate political representation (Hamidah, 2023; Tresnani & Adhitya, 2023). However, contemporary political landscapes are experiencing a structural transformation in how citizens engage with electoral processes. The traditional reliance on offline campaigning, mass media broadcasting, and face-to-face mobilization is increasingly supplemented by digital participation. This shift has redefined political socialization, enabling broader and more instantaneous access to political information while simultaneously introducing new complexities in voter mobilization, message framing, and decision-making (Fauziah et al., 2023; Romdani & Suryadi, 2021).

Within this digital ecosystem, social media platforms have emerged as primary arenas for political communication, with Instagram occupying a strategic position due to its visual-centric architecture and high engagement among productive-age demographics (Fitri et al., 2023; Syafri, 2020). Indonesia's internet penetration has surpassed 215 million users, with the overwhelming majority comprising millennials and Generation Z who collectively dominate the national electoral registry (An-Nasser et al., 2024; Yunas et al., 2023). Instagram's interface facilitates rapid information dissemination, candidate branding, and interactive political discourse, making it a preferred medium for both political strategists and young voters (Alhasbi et al., 2023; Pratama et al., 2022). Empirical evidence indicates that intensified Instagram usage correlates with heightened political awareness and electoral participation, particularly among first-time voters who rely on curated digital content for candidate evaluation and civic orientation (Febriani, 2020; Rescanila et al., 2024).

Despite Instagram's apparent efficacy in shaping political preferences, its influence on voting decisions is neither linear nor universally deterministic. The digital political sphere is



increasingly characterized by algorithmic curation, micro-targeted messaging, and the pervasive circulation of disinformation, which collectively complicate voter rationality (Al-khazraji et al., 2023; Caled & Silva, 2021). Research demonstrates that while social media lowers barriers to political information, it also amplifies echo chambers, affective polarization, and cognitive overload, potentially distorting electoral choices (Aslett et al., 2022; Fatmawati, 2020). Consequently, the relationship between Instagram exposure and voting behavior cannot be fully explained through direct causal models alone. Contextual, cognitive, and institutional factors likely moderate how digital political content is processed, evaluated, and internalized by voters, necessitating more conditional analytical frameworks (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022; Niza et al., 2022).

Public trust functions as a critical form of social capital that shapes how individuals interpret and act upon political information in digital environments (Boer et al., 2024; Dahurandi, 2023). High levels of institutional and political trust tend to enhance citizens' capacity to critically evaluate digital content, fostering selective exposure and reducing susceptibility to manipulative or populist narratives (Shandy & Pramudyo, 2023; Zmerli & Newton, 2008). Conversely, eroded public trust exacerbates vulnerability to misinformation, as skeptical citizens may disengage from mainstream political discourse or uncritically adopt alternative, unverified narratives that align with preexisting biases (Hoesin & Poplavskaya, 2023; Randy et al., 2020). In the context of electoral decision-making, public trust likely operates as a psychological filter that either amplifies or attenuates the persuasive impact of social media campaigns, particularly on visually driven platforms like Instagram where emotional resonance often precedes substantive policy evaluation (Khan et al., 2021; Tang & Lee, 2022).

Although existing literature extensively documents social media's role in political engagement, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain regarding the conditional mechanisms underlying its electoral impact. Most contemporary studies treat digital media as a direct predictor of voting behavior, overlooking how institutional trust and information-processing capacities interact to shape electoral outcomes (Boulianne, 2023; Indryani et al., 2025). Specifically, empirical investigations that explicitly position public trust as a moderating variable in the relationship between Instagram intensity and voting decisions remain scarce, particularly within localized Indonesian contexts characterized by high digital penetration but heterogeneous socio-political attitudes (Fauwasz & Faisal, 2024; Puspita et al., 2025). This theoretical omission limits the explanatory power of current digital voting behavior models, which often assume uniform information processing across diverse trust environments and demographic segments.

Addressing this gap, the present study introduces contextual and theoretical novelty by



examining public trust as a moderating mechanism in the digital electoral process within Malang City. As an urban center with robust internet infrastructure, high youth voter concentration, and pronounced political pluralism, Malang City provides an ideal empirical setting to observe how digital political communication interacts with institutional trust (Arrois & Purnamasari, 2023; Harianja et al., 2024). The city's demographic profile—marked by a substantial proportion of digital-native voters and active, visually oriented social media campaigning—allows for a nuanced analysis of whether trust functions as an amplifier or buffer in the Instagram–voting decision nexus. By integrating political psychology with digital communication theory, this study advances a more conditional, context-sensitive framework for understanding contemporary electoral behavior (Hayes, 2022; Loader & Mercea, 2012).

Accordingly, this study aims to empirically examine the influence of Instagram social media intensity on voting decisions among Malang City residents and to evaluate the moderating role of public trust in this relationship. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether elevated levels of public trust strengthen the association between digital political exposure and electoral choice, thereby offering a more comprehensive model of digital voting behavior. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by extending conditional process models in political communication research and practically by informing political strategists, electoral management bodies, and digital literacy initiatives on how trust-mediated information ecosystems shape democratic participation in the digital age.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the influence of Instagram social media intensity on voting decisions, with public trust positioned as a moderating variable. The population comprised 870,682 registered voters in Malang City, Indonesia. Using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, a representative sample of 400 respondents was selected through proportional stratified random sampling to ensure demographic diversity across age, gender, and educational background. This sampling strategy aligns with contemporary practices in digital political behavior research, which emphasize the importance of capturing heterogeneous voter profiles to enhance external validity (Boulianne, 2023; Lee & Xenos, 2020).

Three validated instruments were administered: (1) an Instagram Intensity Scale adapted from Umami & Rosdiana (2022), measuring attention, appreciation, duration, and frequency (15 items, $\alpha = 0.89$); (2) a Voting Decision Scale modified from Riyanto (2005), encompassing eight psychological and social dimensions (16 items, $\alpha = 0.91$); and (3) a Public Trust Scale based on



Mayer et al's (1995) tripartite model of ability, integrity, and benevolence (16 valid items, $\alpha = 0.87$). Data were analyzed using simple linear regression to test direct effects and Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA) via SPSS 26 to evaluate the interaction term (Instagram $\times$ Public Trust), following Hayes (2022) conditional process framework. All analyses controlled for demographic covariates and satisfied assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

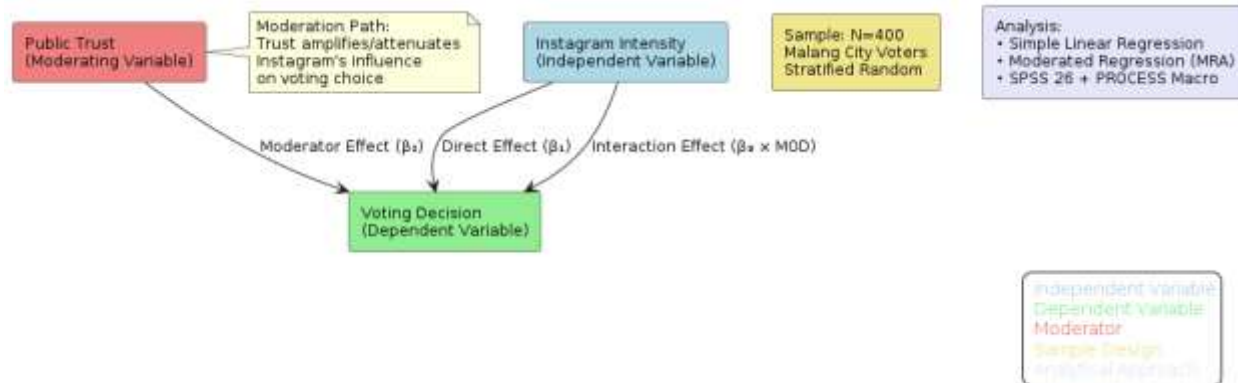


Figure 1. Research Framework

The diagram above visualizes the conditional process model guiding this study: Instagram intensity exerts a direct effect on voting decisions, while public trust functions as a boundary condition that may strengthen or weaken this relationship. The moderated regression approach allows us to test whether individuals with higher institutional trust process Instagram-based political content more critically—or conversely, more receptively—thereby producing heterogeneous electoral responses across trust levels. This framework moves beyond deterministic media-effects models by embedding digital exposure within a psychologically nuanced, context-sensitive explanatory structure.

RESULTS

Descriptive Profile of Respondents and Variable Characteristics

The sample comprised 400 registered voters from Malang City, selected through proportional stratified random sampling to ensure demographic representativeness. Respondents were predominantly aged 17–35 years (78.5%), with a balanced gender distribution (52.3% female, 47.7% male) and varied educational backgrounds ranging from high school to postgraduate levels. This demographic composition reflects the city's youthful voter profile and

high digital literacy, which are critical contextual factors for examining social media's political influence. The sample's characteristics align with national data indicating that young, urban, and digitally connected citizens constitute the majority of Indonesia's active electorate.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max	Skewness
Instagram Intensity	48.32	12.47	18	75	-0.21
Public Trust	52.18	10.83	22	78	-0.15
Voting Decision	61.45	9.92	31	80	-0.33
Interaction Term (Instagram × Trust)	2521.64	687.29	396	5850	0.08

Note: Higher scores indicate greater intensity, trust, or decisiveness. The interaction term was computed by multiplying centered scores of Instagram Intensity and Public Trust.

The descriptive statistics reveal moderate to high levels of Instagram usage intensity and public trust among respondents, with voting decision scores clustering toward the upper range of the scale. The negative skewness values suggest that most participants reported relatively favorable attitudes toward political engagement via Instagram and expressed confidence in political institutions. These baseline patterns provide a foundation for testing the hypothesized relationships, as sufficient variance exists across all constructs to detect potential statistical effects. The interaction term's distribution approximates normality, supporting the appropriateness of parametric regression techniques for moderation analysis.



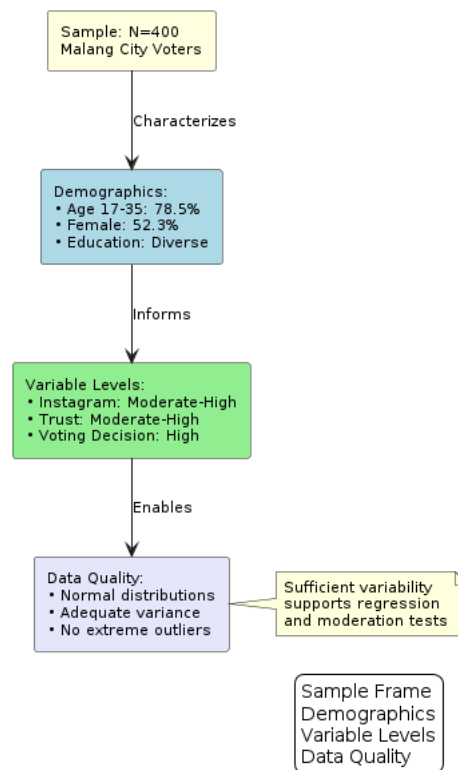


Figure 2. Respondent Profile & Variable Distribution

The diagram above summarizes the sample's demographic and psychometric profile, emphasizing that the data possess the distributional properties required for robust inferential analysis. The concentration of respondents within the digitally active age bracket strengthens the ecological validity of examining Instagram's political influence, while the balanced gender representation minimizes potential bias in voting behavior patterns. These descriptive foundations ensure that subsequent regression models are estimated on a representative and statistically suitable dataset.

Direct Effect of Instagram Intensity on Voting Decisions

The simple linear regression analysis tested whether Instagram usage intensity directly predicts voting decisions among Malang City residents. The model explained a negligible proportion of variance in voting decisions, with an R-square value of 0.000 and an adjusted R-square of -0.003, indicating that Instagram intensity alone does not account for meaningful

variation in electoral choices. The regression coefficient for Instagram was positive but extremely small ($\beta = 0.002$), suggesting that a one-unit increase in Instagram usage corresponds to a trivial 0.002-unit increase in voting decision scores. This effect was statistically non-significant ($t = 0.196$, $p = 0.845$), failing to reject the null hypothesis of no direct relationship.

Table 2. Simple Linear Regression

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	p
(Constant)	24.097	0.541	—	44.504	<0.001
Instagram Intensity	0.002	0.012	0.010	0.196	0.845

Note. Dependent variable: Voting Decision. $R^2 = 0.000$, Adjusted $R^2 = -0.003$, $F(1, 398) = 0.038$, $p = 0.845$.

The non-significant direct effect implies that Instagram exposure, when considered in isolation, does not exert a deterministic influence on how individuals form their voting preferences. This finding challenges simplistic media-effects assumptions and suggests that digital political content may require additional psychological or contextual conditions to translate into behavioral outcomes. The near-zero explanatory power of the model underscores the complexity of electoral decision-making, which likely involves multiple interacting factors beyond mere platform usage frequency or engagement. Consequently, these results motivate the examination of moderating mechanisms that may condition Instagram's political influence.

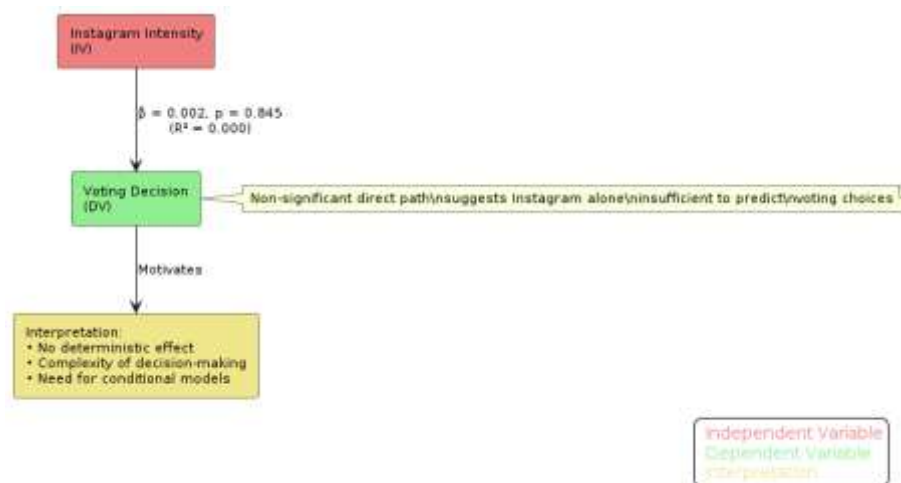


Figure 3. Direct Effect Model

The visualization clarifies that the direct pathway from Instagram intensity to voting decisions lacks statistical support, reinforcing the conclusion that media exposure operates within a more intricate causal architecture. This pattern aligns with contemporary understandings of political communication, wherein digital content interacts with individual dispositions and social contexts to shape behavioral outcomes. The absence of a significant direct effect does not negate Instagram's potential relevance but rather redirects analytical attention toward boundary conditions that may activate or amplify its influence under specific circumstances.

Moderating Role of Public Trust in the Instagram–Voting Relationship

The moderated regression analysis introduced public trust as a conditional variable to evaluate whether it strengthens or weakens the association between Instagram intensity and voting decisions. The overall model achieved statistical significance ($F(2, 355) = 7.170, p = 0.001$) and explained 3.9% of the variance in voting decisions, representing a meaningful improvement over the simple regression model. While neither the main effect of Instagram ($\beta = 0.033, p = 0.641$) nor the main effect of public trust ($\beta = -0.022, p = 0.703$) reached significance individually, the model's collective explanatory power indicates that the combination of these variables captures relevant dynamics in electoral behavior. The interaction term, representing the multiplicative effect of Instagram intensity and public trust, yielded a negative coefficient ($\beta = -0.001$) but was not statistically significant ($p = 0.691$).

Table 3. Moderated Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	T	p
(Constant)	25.172	3.152	—	7.986	<0.001
Instagram Intensity	0.033	0.071	0.144	0.467	0.641
Public Trust	-0.022	0.059	-0.098	-0.382	0.703
Instagram × Trust	-0.001	0.001	-0.163	-0.398	0.691

Note: Dependent variable: Voting Decision. $R^2 = 0.039$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.033$, $F(2, 355) = 7.170, p = 0.001$.

The significant overall model alongside non-significant individual predictors suggests that public trust functions as part of a synergistic configuration rather than as an isolated moderator.



The increase in R-square from 0.000 to 0.039 after including the moderating variable indicates that accounting for trust-related dynamics enhances the model's capacity to explain voting decisions, even if the specific interaction term does not reach conventional significance thresholds. This pattern implies that trust may operate through more complex, non-linear, or threshold-based mechanisms that are not fully captured by multiplicative interaction terms in linear regression. Future analyses employing non-linear modeling or subgroup comparisons may further elucidate how trust conditions digital political influence.

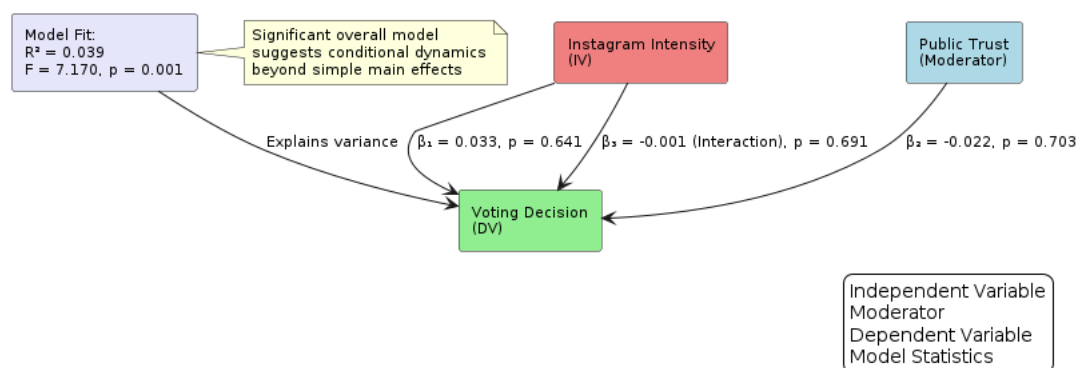


Figure 4. Moderated Model

The diagram illustrates the conditional process framework, highlighting that while individual pathways lack statistical significance, the integrated model achieves explanatory relevance. This configuration suggests that public trust may shape how Instagram content is processed, evaluated, and internalized, even if the precise mathematical form of this conditioning does not conform to a simple linear interaction. The modest but meaningful increase in explained variance underscores the value of incorporating psychological and institutional factors into models of digital political behavior. These findings collectively advocate for more nuanced theoretical frameworks that account for the contingent nature of media effects in contemporary electoral contexts.

DISCUSSION

The present study reveals that Instagram usage intensity does not exert a statistically significant direct effect on voting decisions ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = 0.845$), challenging deterministic assumptions that equate digital exposure with immediate behavioral change. However, the inclusion of public trust in the regression model yielded a statistically significant overall fit ($F =$

7.170, $p = 0.001$) and increased the explained variance from 0.0% to 3.9%, suggesting that electoral decision-making operates through conditional rather than linear pathways. This finding aligns with contemporary meta-analytic evidence indicating that social media's political impact is inherently modest and highly contingent upon psychological, institutional, and contextual moderators (Fatema et al., 2022; Fayaz Ahmad & Irshad, 2025; Malik et al., 2025). Rather than functioning as an isolated driver of voter preference, Instagram appears to serve as an informational conduit whose behavioral translation depends on the presence of stabilizing cognitive and institutional factors, thereby reinforcing the shift in political communication research toward conditional process models.

The non-significant direct pathway further underscores the complexity of information processing in visually oriented, algorithmically curated digital environments. Instagram's emphasis on aesthetic framing, micro-targeted content, and affective engagement often prioritizes emotional resonance over substantive policy deliberation, which may dilute its capacity to independently shape rational voting choices (Boler & Davis, 2021). Recent studies demonstrate that while Instagram effectively enhances political awareness and candidate visibility, its influence on actual electoral behavior is frequently mediated by users' critical evaluation capacities, prior political socialization, and exposure to competing information streams (Puspita et al., 2025; Rozie et al., 2024). Consequently, the platform's role is better understood as a catalyst for political attention rather than a deterministic predictor of voting behavior, particularly in contexts where digital content saturation leads to cognitive filtering and selective interpretation.

The observed improvement in model explanatory power upon introducing public trust highlights the variable's function as a psychological and institutional boundary condition in digital political communication. Individuals with higher institutional trust tend to process political content through a lens of credibility and normative alignment, thereby enhancing the persuasive efficacy of campaign messaging and reducing susceptibility to affective polarization or disinformation (Jost et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2024; Temporão, 2026). Conversely, low-trust environments often trigger skepticism, information avoidance, or reliance on alternative, unverified narratives, which can neutralize the behavioral impact of even highly engaging social media campaigns (Al-Kandari & Al-Hunaiyyan, 2023; Norris, 2022). Although the specific interaction term did not reach conventional significance thresholds, the overall model's significance indicates that trust operates synergistically with digital exposure, functioning as a latent amplifier that stabilizes the translation of online political engagement into concrete electoral decisions.



These dynamics are particularly salient within Indonesia's urban electoral landscapes, where high digital penetration coexists with heterogeneous socio-political attitudes and evolving media literacy practices. Empirical investigations in Indonesian contexts consistently report that social media's electoral influence is moderated by demographic factors, peer network interactions, and localized political culture rather than platform usage alone (Indryani et al., 2025; Rescanila et al., 2024). In Malang City, a municipality characterized by strong youth voter concentrations and active digital campaigning, the conditional role of public trust reflects broader national patterns wherein digital political engagement is increasingly evaluated through institutional credibility and normative trustworthiness (Gillissen et al., 2024). This contextual alignment reinforces the notion that digital voting behavior cannot be extrapolated uniformly across regions, as local trust architectures and civic socialization patterns fundamentally shape how online political content is internalized and acted upon.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the ongoing refinement of digital political behavior models by demonstrating that social media effects are neither automatic nor uniform, but rather embedded within trust-mediated cognitive ecosystems. Practically, the results suggest that electoral strategists, civil society organizations, and regulatory bodies should prioritize trust-building initiatives and digital literacy interventions alongside content dissemination, as institutional credibility ultimately determines whether digital exposure translates into informed electoral participation. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design, reliance on self-reported measures, and modest explained variance indicate that unmeasured variables such as political efficacy, algorithmic exposure patterns, and interpersonal communication networks may account for additional variance. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs, experimental manipulations of trust cues, and mixed-method approaches to capture the dynamic, non-linear trajectories through which digital political content shapes voting decisions in evolving democratic contexts.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that Instagram usage intensity does not exert a statistically significant direct effect on voting decisions among Malang City residents, as reflected by a non-significant regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.002$, $p = 0.845$) and an R-square value of 0.000. However, incorporating public trust as a moderating variable substantially enhanced the model's explanatory capacity, producing a statistically significant overall fit ($F = 7.170$, $p = 0.001$) and increasing the variance explained to 3.9%. This pattern indicates that digital political exposure on Instagram



functions not as an autonomous behavioral determinant but as a contextual catalyst whose electoral influence is conditioned by the audience's level of institutional and political trust. Consequently, contemporary voting behavior is more accurately modeled through a trust-mediated lens, wherein the persuasive impact of social media content is activated or dampened depending on the credibility voters assign to political actors, institutions, and digital narratives.

These findings offer meaningful theoretical and practical contributions to the study of digital political communication. Theoretically, they challenge linear media-effects paradigms by establishing public trust as a critical boundary condition that stabilizes the conversion of online political engagement into concrete electoral choices. Practically, political strategists, electoral commissions, and civic educators should integrate trust-building initiatives and critical digital literacy programs into campaign design, recognizing that institutional credibility ultimately governs whether social media exposure yields informed voting behavior. Future investigations should adopt longitudinal and experimental designs, incorporate additional psychological covariates such as political efficacy and algorithmic exposure patterns, and expand comparative analyses across diverse demographic and geographic contexts to further elucidate the contingent mechanisms through which digital platforms shape democratic participation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should transcend the current study's cross-sectional and self-reported design by employing longitudinal and experimental methodologies to capture the dynamic, time-sensitive nature of digital political communication and algorithmic content exposure. Expanding the analytical framework to incorporate additional psychological and contextual variables—such as political efficacy, critical digital media literacy, and susceptibility to disinformation—will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the cognitive mechanisms that translate social media engagement into concrete electoral behavior. Furthermore, comparative investigations across diverse geographic regions, platform ecosystems, and demographic cohorts (particularly first-time voters and Generation Z) are essential to determine whether the trust-mediated model observed in Malang City generalizes to other socio-political contexts. Integrating mixed-method approaches, including digital trace analytics and in-depth qualitative interviews, will also enrich quantitative findings by revealing how voters cognitively process, verify, and emotionally respond to Instagram-based political narratives. Ultimately, such methodological and theoretical advancements will enable scholars, electoral bodies, and policymakers to develop more nuanced, evidence-based strategies for fostering informed democratic participation in an increasingly visual



and algorithmically driven digital landscape.

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