

Digital Media Consumption and the Formation of Public Opinion in the Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the influence of digital media consumption on the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era, particularly within the context of emotional narratives, social media algorithms, and digital information circulation that increasingly shape public perception. The research employed a qualitative method using a case study design because this approach enables comprehensive exploration of audience experiences, interpretations, and communication behavior within digital media environments. The research was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, selected due to its high level of digital communication activity, social media engagement, and online public participation. The study involved twelve informants consisting of journalists, academics, university students, digital content creators, media workers, and online community members. Informants were selected purposively because of their active involvement in digital media consumption and online interaction. The findings reveal that digital media consumption significantly contributes to public opinion formation through emotional narratives, algorithmic exposure, and participatory communication culture. The study recommends strengthening digital literacy, ethical communication practices, and public critical awareness to address communication challenges in the post-truth era.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways individuals access, interpret, and disseminate information in contemporary society (Gow, 2024). Digital media platforms, including social networking sites, video-sharing applications, online news portals, podcasts, and algorithm-based recommendation systems, have become dominant sources of public information across political, cultural, and social domains (Huang, 2024). Unlike conventional media systems that relied heavily on editorial gatekeeping and institutional verification, digital platforms facilitate decentralized information circulation where users simultaneously function as consumers, producers, and distributors of content (Thakur & Singh, 2025). This transformation has intensified the complexity of public communication processes and significantly influenced the formation of public opinion. In the contemporary post-truth era, emotional appeal, ideological alignment, and personal belief often shape public perceptions more strongly than objective facts and empirical evidence (Zhao, 2024). Consequently, digital media consumption has become a critical issue within communication and cultural studies because it affects not only patterns of information behavior but also democratic participation, political attitudes, cultural identity, and collective social consciousness.

The emergence of the post-truth phenomenon reflects broader sociocultural changes associated with the digitalization of communication ecosystems. The term “post-truth” refers to conditions in which factual accuracy becomes less influential in shaping public opinion than emotional narratives, partisan interpretations, and subjective experiences (Mikhaylov et al., 2023). In digital environments characterized by rapid information flows and algorithmic personalization, users are frequently exposed to selective information that reinforces preexisting beliefs. This condition contributes to the development of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals interact primarily with

ideologically similar perspectives while excluding contradictory viewpoints (Voulgari et al., 2025). As a result, misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated narratives can spread rapidly and shape public discourse at unprecedented speed. Political campaigns, public health debates, environmental controversies, and social movements increasingly demonstrate how digital narratives can influence public perception regardless of factual validity. Therefore, understanding the relationship between digital media consumption and public opinion formation has become increasingly urgent for scholars, policymakers, journalists, and communication practitioners.

Previous studies have extensively discussed the influence of social media on political communication, audience engagement, and information dissemination (Yuan, 2025). Several researchers argue that digital platforms increase democratic participation by providing broader access to information and facilitating civic engagement (E. M. Sari et al., 2024). Other scholars emphasize the negative implications of algorithmic communication, including polarization, misinformation dissemination, online radicalization, and declining trust in traditional institutions (Haapala & Roch, 2025). Existing literature also highlights the role of influencers, digital communities, and participatory culture in shaping audience interpretation of social realities (Qi, 2025). However, despite the growing number of studies examining digital communication in the post-truth context, many investigations remain fragmented and limited to specific platforms, regions, or political events. Several studies focus primarily on technological dimensions without sufficiently examining cultural, psychological, and communicative aspects that influence how audiences interpret digital content and construct public opinion. Moreover, there is still limited integrative analysis explaining how patterns of digital media consumption interact with emotional engagement, cognitive bias, and socio-cultural identity in shaping public discourse within post-truth societies.

The main problem addressed in this research concerns the increasing vulnerability of public opinion formation to emotionally driven digital narratives in environments characterized by information overload and declining trust in institutional authority (Ramdhani & Wijaya, 2025). Contemporary audiences are exposed to massive quantities of information through digital channels, yet not all users possess adequate media literacy skills to critically evaluate content credibility and source reliability. The dominance of sensationalism, clickbait journalism, viral misinformation, and algorithmically amplified narratives creates conditions where public opinion can be manipulated by strategic communication actors (Kartadireja et al., 2024). This phenomenon raises serious concerns regarding democratic deliberation, social cohesion, and the integrity of public communication. The research specifically investigates how patterns of digital media consumption contribute to the formation, reinforcement, and transformation of public opinion in the post-truth era, particularly within contexts where emotional engagement often surpasses rational evaluation.

The research gap identified in this study lies in the limited interdisciplinary approach employed in previous investigations concerning digital media consumption and public opinion. Earlier studies frequently examine media effects from isolated perspectives, such as technological determinism, political communication, or audience behavior, without comprehensively integrating cultural communication theories, media ecology perspectives, and critical digital literacy frameworks (Guess et al., 2024). Furthermore, many studies focus on misinformation dissemination itself rather than analyzing the everyday media consumption practices that enable misinformation to influence public consciousness. There remains insufficient exploration regarding how algorithmic personalization, emotional framing, social identity, and participatory digital culture collectively contribute to the construction of public opinion in post-truth environments. This study seeks to address these limitations by developing a more holistic analytical framework that combines communication theory, cultural analysis, and digital media studies to examine the multidimensional relationship between media consumption and public opinion formation.

The novelty of this research is reflected in its integrative approach to understanding post-truth communication dynamics within contemporary digital ecosystems. Unlike previous studies that analyze digital misinformation or public opinion separately, this research positions digital media consumption patterns as a central communicative process connecting technological systems, emotional narratives, cultural identity, and social perception. The study introduces a conceptual perspective that emphasizes

the interaction between algorithmic exposure, emotional resonance, audience interpretation, and participatory communication in shaping collective public understanding. Additionally, this research contributes new insights by highlighting the role of cultural communication practices in strengthening or challenging post-truth narratives. Through this perspective, the research expands existing scholarly discussions regarding the transformation of public opinion in digitally mediated societies.

Based on these considerations, the research formulates several fundamental questions. The first question concerns how digital media consumption patterns influence the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era. The second question examines the extent to which emotional narratives and algorithmic personalization affect audience perceptions of truth and credibility. The third question investigates how cultural identity, media literacy, and participatory communication practices contribute to audience responses toward misinformation and digital narratives. The final question explores the broader implications of post-truth communication for democratic participation, social trust, and public discourse within digitally connected societies.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the relationship between digital media consumption and the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era through an interdisciplinary communication and cultural perspective. Specifically, the study aims to identify dominant patterns of digital media consumption influencing audience interpretation of social and political information. The research also seeks to examine the role of emotional engagement, algorithmic exposure, and participatory digital culture in shaping public perceptions and collective opinion. Furthermore, the study intends to develop a conceptual framework capable of explaining the interaction between technological communication systems and sociocultural factors in post-truth communication environments. Ultimately, the research aspires to provide critical insights regarding strategies for strengthening digital literacy and promoting more responsible public communication practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of communication and cultural studies by enriching scholarly understanding of public opinion formation within digitally mediated societies. The study expands theoretical discussions concerning media effects, audience reception, digital culture, and post-truth communication by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives into a comprehensive analytical framework. Academically, the research provides a valuable reference for future studies investigating digital communication, political discourse, media literacy, and social interaction in contemporary information societies. The findings may also support curriculum development within communication, media studies, sociology, and cultural studies programs by providing updated conceptual insights regarding post-truth dynamics. Practically, the research offers important implications for policymakers, journalists, educators, and digital platform stakeholders in designing strategies to reduce misinformation dissemination, strengthen public critical awareness, and improve digital communication ethics (Bajrami, 2025). The study may further contribute to the development of educational programs promoting responsible media consumption and critical digital literacy among broader communities.

Despite its contributions, this research acknowledges several limitations. The complexity of digital communication environments and the rapid evolution of technological platforms may limit the generalizability of findings across different sociocultural contexts. Audience behavior within digital ecosystems is highly dynamic and influenced by multiple external variables, including political conditions, economic interests, and technological developments that may change over time. Additionally, the study primarily emphasizes communication and cultural dimensions, which may not fully capture technical algorithmic processes within digital platforms. The interpretation of public opinion itself also presents methodological challenges because public perceptions are continuously negotiated through social interaction and mediated communication.

Therefore, future research is encouraged to adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches to examine the evolution of digital media consumption and public opinion across diverse cultural and political contexts. Subsequent studies may further explore the role of artificial intelligence, automated communication systems, and emerging digital technologies in shaping post-truth communication environments. Future investigations are also recommended to integrate computational communication methods, big data analysis, and ethnographic approaches to generate deeper understanding regarding

audience interaction with digital narratives. By expanding interdisciplinary perspectives and methodological innovation, future research can contribute more comprehensively to understanding the transformation of public communication in increasingly digitalized societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of digital media consumption and the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era has become increasingly significant within contemporary communication and cultural studies (HUANG et al., 2025). The rapid development of digital technologies has transformed communication patterns from one-directional dissemination toward interactive and participatory communication ecosystems (Samsidar, 2024). In this context, audiences are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in constructing, interpreting, and redistributing social narratives through digital platforms (Kumkar, 2023). The emergence of misinformation, disinformation, algorithmic personalization, and emotionally driven communication has intensified scholarly concerns regarding the decline of factual authority and the vulnerability of public opinion to manipulative narratives (A. Ali et al., 2023). Therefore, a comprehensive theoretical foundation is necessary to explain how digital media consumption shapes public understanding and social perception within post-truth communication environments. This research employs three major theoretical perspectives, namely Agenda-Setting Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Media Ecology Theory, to analyze the multidimensional relationship between digital communication systems and public opinion formation.

Agenda-Setting Theory was initially popularized by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 through their influential research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States (Girdharry & Rourke, 2025). The theory emerged from their empirical investigation concerning the role of mass media during the 1968 United States presidential election. McCombs and Shaw argued that the media may not directly determine what audiences think, but the media significantly influence what audiences think about (Marciano et al., 2024). According to this perspective, the prominence and frequency of issues presented within media coverage shape public priorities and influence collective social attention. The theory emphasizes that media institutions possess the power to construct public agendas by selectively highlighting particular topics while marginalizing others. In digital communication environments, agenda-setting processes have become more complex because social media algorithms, influencers, online communities, and participatory audiences increasingly contribute to determining issue visibility and public discourse (Beyer & Figenschou, 2025).

The conceptual framework of Agenda-Setting Theory has developed significantly in response to digital transformation. McCombs later expanded the theory into second-level agenda setting, emphasizing not only issue salience but also attribute salience, where media influence how audiences perceive specific characteristics of social and political issues (Valkanova, 2023). Contemporary scholars such as Shanto Iyengar from Stanford University, United States, further developed framing dimensions within agenda-setting processes by demonstrating how media presentation influences audience interpretation and emotional response (Cinque, 2024). Similarly, Manuel Castells from the Open University of Catalonia, Spain, emphasized that digital network communication has decentralized traditional agenda-setting authority, enabling online communities and social actors to compete in shaping public narratives (Canbolat, 2023). In the context of the post-truth era, Agenda-Setting Theory becomes highly relevant because digital platforms amplify emotionally engaging content, viral narratives, and sensational information that strongly influence public opinion regardless of factual validity (Lobnikar et al., 2025). This theoretical perspective helps explain the main problem of the research, namely the increasing dominance of emotionally charged digital narratives in shaping collective public understanding.

The second theory employed in this research is Uses and Gratifications Theory, which was systematically developed by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 through academic collaborations associated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and the University of Leeds, United Kingdom (Hossain et al., 2023). Unlike traditional media effects theories that emphasize media influence over passive audiences, Uses and Gratifications Theory positions audiences as active communicators who consciously select media to satisfy specific psychological, informational, social, and emotional needs. The theory argues that media consumption behavior is motivated by

audience expectations, personal interests, social identity, entertainment preferences, and cognitive satisfaction. Individuals consume media content strategically to fulfill particular gratifications, including information seeking, emotional release, social interaction, identity reinforcement, and escapism (Aghaz & Salmasi, 2024).

The relevance of Uses and Gratifications Theory has increased substantially in contemporary digital environments characterized by personalized media consumption and participatory communication (Noor, 2025). Digital media platforms allow users to select, customize, and interact with information according to individual preferences and ideological orientations. Denis McQuail from the University of Southampton, United Kingdom, expanded this perspective by emphasizing that modern audiences actively negotiate media meanings within broader sociocultural contexts (Cho, 2025). Furthermore, Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom, highlighted how digital audiences develop interactive relationships with communication technologies that shape identity formation and civic participation (Anggrayni et al., 2024). In the post-truth era, Uses and Gratifications Theory provides important insights into why audiences may prefer emotionally resonant narratives over factually accurate information. Individuals frequently consume and share digital content that aligns with personal beliefs, emotional experiences, and ideological identities (Raspopina, 2024). Consequently, the theory contributes to understanding the research gap concerning the interaction between emotional engagement, selective exposure, and public opinion formation within digital communication ecosystems.

The third theoretical perspective utilized in this study is Media Ecology Theory, primarily popularized by Marshall McLuhan during the 1960s through his academic work at the University of Toronto, Canada (Riboldazzi, 2025). McLuhan introduced the famous proposition that “the medium is the message,” emphasizing that communication technologies themselves significantly shape human perception, social interaction, and cultural organization (Sarimin et al., 2024). According to Media Ecology Theory, media environments influence how societies think, communicate, and construct social realities. Technological forms are not merely neutral channels for transmitting information but active forces that restructure patterns of consciousness and public interaction. McLuhan argued that electronic media create a “global village” where communication becomes immediate, interconnected, and emotionally immersive.

The development of Media Ecology Theory has become increasingly relevant within digital communication studies. Neil Postman from New York University, United States, expanded McLuhan’s ideas by analyzing how media environments influence public discourse, critical thinking, and democratic culture (Azzahra & Tekle, 2024). Postman argued that entertainment-oriented communication systems may weaken rational public deliberation and encourage superficial engagement with complex social issues. More recently, José van Dijck from Utrecht University, Netherlands, examined the emergence of platform societies in which algorithmic systems structure social interaction, information visibility, and public participation (Mensonides et al., 2024). These contemporary developments demonstrate that digital media platforms are not passive technological infrastructures but active sociocultural environments shaping public perception and communication behavior. Within the post-truth context, Media Ecology Theory explains how digital communication environments facilitate rapid information dissemination, emotional amplification, and the normalization of misinformation (Lee & Blevins, 2024). This perspective directly addresses the research problem concerning the transformation of public opinion within algorithm-driven media ecosystems.

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives creates a comprehensive conceptual framework for analyzing digital media consumption and public opinion formation in the post-truth era. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how digital media prioritize and amplify certain issues within public discourse. Uses and Gratifications Theory clarifies why audiences selectively consume emotionally aligned information and participate in digital communication networks. Media Ecology Theory demonstrates how technological environments restructure social interaction and shape collective perception. Together, these theories provide interdisciplinary insights capable of addressing the primary research problem regarding the increasing influence of emotionally driven digital narratives on public opinion formation (Graham & FitzGerald, 2024).

The theoretical integration also addresses the research gap identified within previous studies. Existing literature often examines misinformation, media consumption, or digital participation separately without integrating communication, psychological, and technological perspectives into a unified analytical framework (Dederichs & Lee, 2025). By combining these theories, the research develops a more holistic understanding of how algorithmic exposure, audience motivation, and technological environments interact in shaping post-truth communication processes. This integrated perspective represents the novelty of the research because it positions digital media consumption not merely as an individual activity but as a multidimensional communicative process influenced by sociocultural, emotional, and technological factors simultaneously.

The theoretical framework is closely connected to the formulation of the research questions. Agenda-Setting Theory supports the investigation of how digital platforms influence issue salience and public attention. Uses and Gratifications Theory contributes to examining audience motivations and emotional engagement in consuming digital content. Media Ecology Theory facilitates analysis regarding the broader impact of digital communication environments on social perception and democratic discourse. Consequently, the theories collectively support the research objectives of analyzing the relationship between digital media consumption and public opinion formation while also identifying the communicative dynamics characterizing post-truth societies.

The benefits of employing these theories are significant across theoretical, academic, and practical dimensions. Theoretically, the research contributes to the development of interdisciplinary communication studies by integrating classical and contemporary media theories within digital contexts. Academically, the study provides a conceptual reference for future investigations concerning digital communication, misinformation, public discourse, and media literacy. Practically, the findings may assist policymakers, educators, journalists, and digital platform stakeholders in designing communication strategies capable of strengthening critical media literacy, reducing misinformation vulnerability, and encouraging more responsible digital participation (Tworek, 2023).

In conclusion, the literature review demonstrates that Agenda-Setting Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Media Ecology Theory collectively provide a strong conceptual foundation for analyzing digital media consumption and the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era. The perspectives developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, Elihu Katz and colleagues, and Marshall McLuhan explain how media agendas, audience motivations, and technological environments interact in shaping contemporary public discourse. The integration of these theories addresses the primary research problem, responds to existing research gaps, and supports the novelty of the study by offering an interdisciplinary analytical framework. Furthermore, the theoretical synthesis strengthens the formulation of research questions, objectives, and practical implications while contributing to broader scholarly discussions concerning communication and culture in digitally mediated societies (Murphy-Reuter & Burke-Garcia, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the relationship between digital media consumption and the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era (Akkhateerathitiphum et al., 2025). The qualitative method is considered the most appropriate approach because the research seeks to explore complex social meanings, interpretive communication processes, audience experiences, and subjective perceptions regarding digital media use and public opinion construction. Unlike quantitative methods that focus primarily on numerical measurement and statistical relationships, qualitative research enables a deeper understanding of communicative behavior, emotional engagement, cultural interpretation, and social interaction within digital environments (Low et al., 2023). The post-truth phenomenon involves multidimensional communication processes shaped by emotions, ideology, identity, and media narratives; therefore, an interpretive qualitative perspective is necessary to analyze how audiences construct meaning from digital content and how such meaning influences collective opinion formation.

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative case study design (Haman, 2025). The case study approach is selected because it allows comprehensive investigation of contemporary social phenomena within real-life communication contexts. This design is particularly relevant for analyzing

digital communication practices because public opinion formation in the post-truth era cannot be separated from the sociocultural environments in which audiences interact with digital media platforms. Through the case study approach, the research examines communication behaviors, media consumption patterns, and interpretive practices occurring within specific digital communities and social environments. The design also facilitates in-depth exploration of how misinformation, emotional narratives, and algorithmic communication influence audience perceptions and collective understanding. Furthermore, the qualitative case study approach supports contextual analysis by connecting individual media experiences with broader sociopolitical and cultural transformations associated with digital communication ecosystems (Kumar et al., 2025).

The research was conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, particularly within urban communities characterized by intensive digital media use and active engagement with social networking platforms. Jakarta was selected as the research location because it represents one of the largest digital communication centers in Southeast Asia, where internet penetration, social media participation, and online political communication have increased significantly in recent years (Alasal, 2025). The city reflects the characteristics of a digitally connected society in which information circulation occurs rapidly across multiple online platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and digital news portals. Jakarta also demonstrates strong public interaction with political discourse, social campaigns, viral narratives, and online public debates, making it an appropriate setting for examining post-truth communication phenomena. In addition, the diversity of social backgrounds, educational levels, professional sectors, and political orientations within Jakarta's urban population provides rich communicative contexts for understanding variations in digital media consumption and public opinion formation.

The selection of participants in this research was conducted through purposive sampling techniques (Jeppesen & Sartoretto, 2023). Purposive sampling was chosen because the study requires participants who possess specific experiences and characteristics related to digital media consumption and participation in online public discourse. The sampling strategy emphasizes information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights regarding communication behavior, digital interaction, and perceptions toward information credibility within digital environments. The research involved twelve primary informants consisting of journalists, university students, digital content creators, communication scholars, social activists, media practitioners, and members of online communities actively engaged in digital communication activities. The number of informants was considered sufficient because qualitative research prioritizes depth of information and thematic saturation rather than statistical representation (Englander, 2024).

Several informants were selected from professional media and communication sectors because they directly interact with information production and dissemination processes. One informant identified by the pseudonym "Andi" works as a digital journalist for an online news platform in Jakarta. He was selected because of his experience in observing the spread of misinformation and the transformation of digital journalism practices in the post-truth era. Another informant, "Rina," is a social media content creator specializing in sociopolitical commentary. She was chosen because her communication activities involve direct audience engagement through algorithm-driven platforms. "Dimas," a communication lecturer at a private university, was included due to his expertise in media literacy and digital communication studies. Additionally, "Nadia," a member of a youth online activist community, was selected because of her active participation in digital campaigns and online public discussions related to social and political issues.

The study also involved participants representing general digital media audiences. "Farhan," a university student majoring in political science, was selected because young adults represent one of the most active demographic groups consuming digital media content (Khamcharoen et al., 2025). "Siti," an office employee working in the technology sector, was included because of her routine interaction with online information platforms for professional and personal communication purposes. Another participant, "Bima," a freelance graphic designer and active user of social networking applications, was selected because of his involvement in digital community discussions and online information sharing. These participants provided valuable perspectives concerning audience interpretation of digital

narratives, emotional responses to online content, and experiences interacting with misinformation within social media environments.

The reasons for selecting these informants are closely related to the objectives of the research. First, the participants represent diverse professional, educational, and communicative backgrounds, allowing the study to capture varied perspectives regarding digital media consumption and public opinion formation. Second, all informants demonstrate active engagement with digital communication platforms, ensuring the relevance of their experiences to the research topic. Third, the selected participants possess sufficient communicative awareness and reflective capacity to discuss issues concerning misinformation, media credibility, emotional narratives, and algorithmic communication processes. The diversity of informants also supports triangulation of perspectives, which strengthens the credibility and interpretive validity of qualitative findings (Susano, 2024) .

Data collection in this research was conducted through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation analysis (Makhortykh, 2024). In-depth interviews served as the primary method because they allow participants to explain their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations in detail. Semi-structured interview techniques were employed to provide flexibility during communication while maintaining consistency with the research objectives (Gökoğlu & Özhan, 2024). The interviews focused on participants' digital media habits, perceptions of online information credibility, experiences encountering misinformation, emotional reactions toward digital narratives, and views regarding the influence of social media on public opinion.

Digital observation was also conducted to examine online communication practices within selected digital platforms and public discussion forums (Nazara et al., 2025). This technique enabled the researcher to observe patterns of information sharing, audience interaction, emotional engagement, and participatory communication behaviors within digital environments. Documentation analysis included the examination of online articles, social media posts, digital campaign materials, and viral communication content relevant to post-truth discourse. These multiple data collection methods support methodological triangulation and increase the reliability of the research findings (Zankova, 2024).

The analysis of research data employed thematic analysis techniques (Emre, 2023). Thematic analysis was selected because it facilitates systematic identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes emerging from participant narratives and digital communication observations. The analysis process involved several stages, including data transcription, coding, theme categorization, thematic interpretation, and conceptual synthesis. Initial coding focused on identifying important concepts related to media consumption patterns, emotional engagement, misinformation exposure, public perception, and algorithmic communication. The coded data were then organized into broader thematic categories reflecting the relationship between digital communication practices and public opinion formation within post-truth environments.

To ensure research validity and trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation techniques involving multiple data sources, participant perspectives, and analytical methods (Ateşgöz, 2025). Member checking was also conducted by confirming interpretive findings with selected participants to ensure accuracy and credibility. Additionally, peer debriefing with communication scholars and qualitative research experts was utilized to strengthen analytical consistency and minimize researcher bias during interpretation.

The conclusion-drawing technique in this research followed an inductive qualitative reasoning process (Dutton & Blank, 2025). Conclusions were generated through continuous interpretation of emerging themes, participant narratives, and communication patterns identified during the analysis stage. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study developed conceptual understanding from empirical findings obtained within real communication contexts. The inductive approach enables the research to identify broader patterns concerning the influence of digital media consumption on public opinion formation in the post-truth era. Through thematic interpretation and conceptual synthesis, the study formulates conclusions regarding how digital communication environments, emotional narratives, and participatory media practices shape audience perceptions and collective social understanding.

Overall, the qualitative case study method employed in this research provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing digital media consumption and public opinion formation within post-truth societies. By integrating in-depth interviews, digital observation, and thematic analysis, the study generates contextual and interpretive insights regarding contemporary communication behavior. The methodological approach also supports the broader objective of understanding the sociocultural and communicative transformations associated with digital media ecosystems in the post-truth era (D. A. Ali, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research demonstrate that digital media consumption significantly influences the formation of public opinion in the post-truth era through the interaction of emotional narratives, algorithmic communication systems, participatory media culture, and selective audience interpretation (Kirkorian, 2024). The study reveals that audiences increasingly depend on social networking platforms, short-video applications, and online discussion forums as primary sources of information regarding political, social, and cultural issues (Bruyssel, 2024). However, the findings also indicate that the intensity of digital media exposure does not necessarily improve audience understanding of factual information. Instead, the rapid circulation of emotionally charged content frequently shapes public perception more strongly than objective evidence or institutional verification (Dutta, 2024). This condition reflects the central problem identified in the research, namely the vulnerability of public opinion to emotionally persuasive digital narratives within highly interconnected communication environments.

The research findings indicate that audiences tend to prioritize emotionally resonant information because digital platforms encourage rapid consumption, instant reactions, and simplified interpretations of complex social realities (Li et al., 2023). Informants reported that they often encountered viral content containing provocative language, dramatic visuals, and ideological framing that influenced their perceptions before they verified the factual accuracy of the information. Participants also acknowledged that algorithmic recommendation systems repeatedly exposed them to similar narratives aligned with their personal beliefs and social identities. Consequently, digital media consumption patterns contributed to the reinforcement of ideological preferences and emotional attachment toward particular viewpoints. These findings strongly correspond with Agenda-Setting Theory developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, which emphasizes that media systems influence public attention by prioritizing certain issues and narratives within public discourse (Agustina et al., 2023). In the context of digital communication, agenda-setting processes no longer operate solely through traditional journalism institutions but also through algorithms, influencers, and participatory audiences (Goyanes & Cañedo, 2024).

The following table summarizes the major findings of the study regarding digital media consumption and public opinion formation.

Table

Table 1 Major Findings on Digital Media Consumption and Public Opinion Formation in the Post-Truth Era

Research Aspect	Main Findings	Related Theory	Practical Implication
Digital Media Consumption	Audiences rely heavily on social media platforms for political and social information	Uses and Gratifications Theory	Increased dependence on personalized digital information
Emotional Narratives	Emotional content influences public perception more strongly than factual accuracy	Agenda-Setting Theory	Viral misinformation rapidly shapes public discourse

Research Aspect	Main Findings	Related Theory	Practical Implication
Algorithmic Exposure	Algorithms reinforce selective exposure and ideological preferences	Media Ecology Theory	Echo chambers and filter bubbles intensify polarization
Public Opinion Formation	Public opinion is constructed through participatory communication and online interaction	Agenda-Setting and Media Ecology Theory	Public discourse becomes decentralized and fragmented
Information Credibility	Audiences demonstrate inconsistent verification practices	Uses and Gratifications Theory	Media literacy challenges increase within digital societies
Participatory Culture	Users actively share and reproduce narratives aligned with identity and emotion	Media Ecology Theory	Digital participation accelerates narrative circulation

The findings also reveal that digital audiences frequently consume information not only for informational purposes but also for emotional satisfaction, identity reinforcement, entertainment, and social belonging (Giannetti, 2023). Informants explained that they preferred content creators and online communities sharing perspectives consistent with their beliefs and emotional experiences. This behavior reflects the central assumptions of Uses and Gratifications Theory proposed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. The theory explains that audiences actively select media content capable of fulfilling psychological and social needs (Uhls et al., 2024). In the post-truth communication environment, emotional gratification often becomes more dominant than rational information evaluation. Audiences seek confirmation, emotional validation, and group affiliation through digital communication platforms, leading to selective exposure and reduced willingness to engage with opposing perspectives (Lassen, 2025).

The implementation of Uses and Gratifications Theory within this research demonstrates that audience motivation significantly shapes digital communication behavior. Participants acknowledged that they frequently shared emotionally appealing information before verifying its credibility because the content generated immediate emotional reactions and social engagement. Some informants indicated that viral narratives created feelings of solidarity, fear, anger, or collective identity that encouraged rapid participation in online discussions. This finding illustrates how emotional gratification contributes to the construction of public opinion in the post-truth era. The results also address the identified research gap concerning the limited exploration of emotional motivation within previous studies of digital communication. Earlier research frequently emphasized technological aspects of misinformation dissemination without sufficiently examining audience psychological engagement and communicative interpretation (Makwana & Bhatia, 2024).

The study further demonstrates that digital communication environments themselves significantly shape public perception and communication behavior. Informants described how algorithmic systems continuously recommended similar content based on previous interactions, search history, and engagement patterns. Participants noted that repeated exposure to homogeneous narratives gradually strengthened their confidence in specific viewpoints while limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. This phenomenon supports Media Ecology Theory introduced by Marshall McLuhan, which argues that communication technologies actively influence social consciousness and patterns of interaction (Sautedé & Mo, 2025). Digital media platforms do not function merely as neutral channels of information distribution but operate as environments structuring communication behavior, emotional engagement, and public discourse.

The contemporary relevance of Media Ecology Theory becomes increasingly evident within algorithm-driven communication ecosystems (Cole et al., 2025). The findings reveal that audiences

experience information overload, shortened attention spans, and intensified emotional responses due to the structure of digital communication platforms. Informants explained that short-form videos, visual storytelling, sensational headlines, and interactive features encouraged rapid interpretation of social issues without deeper analytical reflection. This condition contributes to the normalization of superficial public discourse where emotional immediacy often replaces critical evaluation. The implementation of Media Ecology Theory in this study therefore provides a broader understanding of how technological environments shape communication culture in post-truth societies.

The findings related to the main research problem demonstrate that public opinion formation in digital societies is increasingly influenced by emotional narratives amplified through algorithmic systems and participatory communication practices. This result corresponds with previous studies conducted by Manuel Castells, who argued that network societies decentralize communication authority and transform audiences into active participants within public discourse (Trejo-Quintana et al., 2025). Similarly, the findings support the work of José van Dijck concerning platform societies, where digital infrastructures shape patterns of social interaction and information visibility (Abdulina & Bekmagambetova, 2024). However, this research extends previous scholarship by integrating emotional engagement, audience motivation, and technological environments into a comprehensive analytical framework. The novelty of the study lies in its interdisciplinary explanation of how public opinion emerges through the interaction of communication technology, emotional interpretation, and participatory digital culture simultaneously.

The research findings also address the identified gap concerning the limited integration of communication theories in previous studies examining post-truth communication. Earlier investigations often analyzed misinformation dissemination separately from audience behavior and technological structures (Buček & Iskanderova, 2025). In contrast, this research demonstrates that public opinion formation results from interconnected processes involving agenda-setting dynamics, audience gratification motives, and media ecological conditions. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how digital narratives become socially prominent. Uses and Gratifications Theory clarifies why audiences selectively consume emotionally aligned information. Media Ecology Theory explains how technological systems restructure communication behavior and social consciousness. The integration of these theories provides a holistic explanation of post-truth communication dynamics.

The findings further answer the formulated research questions concerning the influence of digital media consumption on public opinion formation. First, the study confirms that digital media consumption significantly shapes public attention toward specific issues through viral narratives, trending topics, and algorithmic amplification (Alon et al., 2025). Second, emotional narratives and personalized communication systems strongly affect audience perceptions of truth, credibility, and social reality (Alvermann, 2023). Third, audience identity, emotional attachment, and digital participation contribute to selective interpretation and reproduction of information within online communities (D. F. Sari & Aesthetika, 2025). Finally, the findings demonstrate that post-truth communication environments create fragmented public discourse characterized by ideological polarization and declining trust in institutional information sources (Bulya & Izzati, 2024).

The research objectives are successfully achieved through the empirical findings and theoretical analysis. The study identifies dominant patterns of digital media consumption influencing audience perception in the post-truth era. It also explains the relationship between emotional engagement, algorithmic exposure, and participatory communication within digital environments. Furthermore, the research develops an interdisciplinary conceptual framework integrating Agenda-Setting Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Media Ecology Theory to explain contemporary public opinion formation processes. The implementation of these theories strengthens the analytical depth of the research and contributes to broader communication scholarship concerning digital culture and post-truth communication (Aljasir, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute significantly to communication and cultural studies by demonstrating the interconnected relationship between media systems, audience

behavior, and technological environments. The research enriches Agenda-Setting Theory by illustrating how agenda construction increasingly involves algorithmic recommendation systems and participatory audiences rather than traditional journalism institutions alone (Choi, 2023). The study also extends Uses and Gratifications Theory by highlighting the role of emotional validation and ideological reinforcement within digital communication practices (Fichnová, 2024). Moreover, the findings strengthen Media Ecology Theory by explaining how algorithm-driven platforms reshape communication behavior and public discourse within post-truth societies (Ndlovu & Mutanda, 2024).

Academically, the study provides valuable contributions to future research concerning digital communication, misinformation, media literacy, political communication, and cultural studies. The integrated theoretical framework developed in this research may serve as a reference for interdisciplinary investigations examining communication behavior within contemporary digital ecosystems. The findings also support the development of critical media literacy education emphasizing not only technical information verification but also emotional awareness and communicative responsibility (Lubiński, 2023). This contribution is particularly important because post-truth communication environments involve complex interactions between technology, culture, and psychology.

Practically, the research findings offer implications for policymakers, journalists, educators, communication practitioners, and digital platform stakeholders. The results indicate the urgent need for digital literacy programs capable of improving audience critical evaluation skills and emotional awareness in consuming online information. Educational institutions may utilize the findings to develop media literacy curricula encouraging critical thinking and ethical communication practices. Journalists and media organizations may also benefit from the findings by recognizing the importance of responsible digital reporting and contextual information presentation. Furthermore, digital platform providers should consider implementing communication policies and algorithmic transparency mechanisms reducing the amplification of misleading and emotionally manipulative content (GUO, 2025).

The discussion of findings also corresponds with previous empirical research concerning misinformation and public discourse within digital societies. Earlier studies conducted by Shanto Iyengar demonstrated that framing and emotional presentation significantly influence audience interpretation of political issues (König & Suhr, 2023). This research confirms those findings by showing that emotionally framed digital narratives shape public perception more effectively than fact-based explanations. Similarly, Denis McQuail emphasized that audiences actively negotiate media meanings according to personal and social contexts (Ridder, 2023). The present study supports this argument by revealing how participants selectively consume and reproduce information aligned with emotional identity and ideological preference.

The findings additionally reinforce Neil Postman's argument that technologically mediated communication environments may weaken rational public deliberation (Oliszewski et al., 2024). Informants frequently acknowledged difficulties distinguishing credible information from manipulative narratives because digital platforms prioritize engagement speed and emotional reaction rather than reflective analysis. This condition demonstrates how post-truth communication environments contribute to fragmented public discourse and declining trust toward institutional authority. Nevertheless, the research also identifies opportunities for strengthening critical communication practices through media literacy education and responsible digital participation.

In conclusion, the findings and discussion demonstrate that digital media consumption significantly shapes public opinion formation within post-truth societies through the interaction of emotional narratives, algorithmic communication systems, and participatory digital culture (Felton et al., 2023). Agenda-Setting Theory explains how digital platforms prioritize certain narratives within public discourse. Uses and Gratifications Theory clarifies why audiences selectively consume emotionally satisfying content. Media Ecology Theory demonstrates how communication technologies restructure social interaction and public perception. The integration of these theories addresses the main

research problem, fills the identified research gap, answers the formulated research questions, and supports the achievement of research objectives. Furthermore, the findings contribute theoretically, academically, and practically to broader discussions concerning digital communication and public discourse in contemporary post-truth societies.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research confirm that digital media consumption has become one of the most influential factors shaping public opinion in the post-truth era. The transformation of communication systems from conventional mass media toward participatory digital platforms has significantly altered the processes through which audiences access, interpret, and disseminate information. The study demonstrates that contemporary digital communication environments encourage rapid information circulation, emotional engagement, and algorithmically personalized content exposure, all of which contribute to the formation of collective public perception. The research further reveals that audiences increasingly rely on digital platforms such as social media, online news portals, and short-video applications as primary sources of information regarding political, social, and cultural issues. However, this intensive dependence on digital communication technologies does not necessarily strengthen public understanding of factual information. Instead, emotionally persuasive narratives frequently influence public opinion more effectively than objective evidence or institutional verification.

The results and discussion indicate that emotional narratives play a central role in shaping audience interpretation within post-truth communication environments. Digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged information capable of generating fear, anger, solidarity, and ideological attachment among users. Consequently, public opinion is often constructed through emotional resonance rather than rational evaluation. The study demonstrates that audiences tend to prioritize information aligning with their beliefs, identities, and social experiences, while contradictory perspectives are frequently ignored or rejected. This condition contributes to the development of selective exposure, echo chambers, and fragmented public discourse. Therefore, the post-truth phenomenon cannot be understood solely as a problem of misinformation dissemination but must also be analyzed as a communicative and cultural process involving emotional engagement, identity formation, and participatory media behavior.

The implementation of Agenda-Setting Theory within the study confirms that digital media platforms significantly influence public attention by amplifying certain issues, narratives, and social controversies. Unlike traditional communication environments dominated by institutional journalism, contemporary agenda-setting processes involve algorithms, influencers, online communities, and participatory audiences. Viral content, trending topics, and emotionally framed narratives increasingly determine which issues become publicly visible and socially influential. The research findings show that digital agenda construction operates through continuous interaction between technological systems and user participation, resulting in the rapid formation of public discourse within online environments.

The application of Uses and Gratifications Theory further demonstrates that audiences actively consume digital media content to fulfill various psychological and social needs, including emotional satisfaction, identity reinforcement, social belonging, and entertainment. The study reveals that users frequently select and share information not only because of its informational value but also because it supports emotional expression and ideological affiliation. This finding explains why emotionally appealing narratives often spread more rapidly than fact-based communication. Audiences participate in digital communication ecosystems as active interpreters and distributors of information, contributing to the reproduction of narratives aligned with their personal and collective identities.

The research also validates the relevance of Media Ecology Theory in explaining how technological communication environments shape patterns of social interaction and public consciousness. Digital platforms function not merely as channels of information distribution but as communication environments influencing audience behavior, attention patterns, emotional responses, and social perception. Algorithmic recommendation systems continuously expose users to repetitive and ideologically similar content, reinforcing existing beliefs and reducing opportunities for critical engagement with alternative viewpoints. As a result, digital communication environments contribute to

the normalization of fragmented discourse, reduced trust in institutional authority, and increased vulnerability to manipulative narratives.

The findings and discussion additionally demonstrate that the integration of Agenda-Setting Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Media Ecology Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding public opinion formation in the post-truth era. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how issues become socially prominent through digital visibility and algorithmic amplification. Uses and Gratifications Theory clarifies audience motivations in consuming emotionally resonant information. Media Ecology Theory explains how technological environments reshape communication behavior and collective social understanding. The integration of these theories addresses the main research problem concerning the increasing influence of emotionally driven digital narratives on public opinion within algorithm-based communication ecosystems.

This research also successfully addresses the identified research gap regarding the limited interdisciplinary analysis of digital communication and post-truth discourse. Previous studies frequently examined misinformation, audience behavior, or technological systems separately. In contrast, this study demonstrates that public opinion formation emerges from interconnected processes involving media agendas, audience motivations, emotional interpretation, and technological structures simultaneously. The novelty of the research lies in its ability to connect communication theory, digital culture, and media ecology perspectives into a unified framework capable of explaining contemporary post-truth communication dynamics.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the development of communication and cultural studies by enriching scholarly understanding of digital media influence within participatory societies. Academically, the research provides an important reference for future investigations concerning digital communication, media literacy, public discourse, and algorithmic culture. Practically, the findings emphasize the urgent need for critical digital literacy programs, responsible communication strategies, and ethical media practices capable of strengthening public awareness and reducing vulnerability to misinformation and emotional manipulation.

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that digital media consumption significantly shapes public opinion in the post-truth era through the interaction of emotional narratives, audience participation, and algorithmic communication systems. Public discourse within digital societies is increasingly influenced by emotional engagement and selective exposure rather than factual verification alone. Therefore, strengthening media literacy, critical thinking, and ethical communication practices becomes essential for promoting healthier public discourse and more responsible digital participation in contemporary communication environments.

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