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The Impact of Social Media Communication on Public Acceptance of Urban Infrastructure Projects: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach

Seyed Mohsen Banihashemi*

Assistant Professor, Department of cultural and media management , Faculty of culture and communication, International University of Soore, Tehran, Iran

Corresponding Author Email: smohsenb@yahoo.com

Abstract
Public acceptance is a critical determinant of the successful implementation of urban infrastructure projects, yet limited empirical research has examined the role of social media communication in shaping citizens' perceptions and support. This study investigates the impact of social media communication on public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects, with perceived transparency and public trust examined as mediating mechanisms. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected through an online survey of 462 urban residents. Structural Equation Modelling was applied to test the proposed conceptual model. The results indicate that social media communication has a significant direct effect on public acceptance ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, social media communication strongly influences perceived transparency ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$) and public trust ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), both of which significantly enhance public acceptance ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Mediation analysis using bootstrapping confirms that perceived transparency and public trust partially mediate the relationship between social media communication and public acceptance. The structural model explains 54% of the variance in public acceptance, indicating substantial explanatory power. The findings demonstrate that social media communication functions as a strategic governance tool that enhances transparency and trust, thereby fostering public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects. This study contributes to the literature by integrating digital communication theory with urban governance research and offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to improve citizen engagement through social media.

Keywords: Social media communication; Public acceptance; Urban infrastructure; Structural equation modelling; Public trust

Introduction

Rapid urbanization has become one of the defining global trends of the twenty-first century, placing unprecedented pressure on cities to develop and upgrade urban infrastructure systems. Transportation networks, energy facilities, water supply systems, waste management plants, and large-scale public amenities are essential for supporting economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social well-being in urban areas (Kourkouridis, Frangopoulos, & Kapitsinis, 2024). Despite their functional necessity, urban infrastructure projects frequently encounter resistance from the public, manifesting in protests, legal challenges, political opposition, and delays in implementation. Public acceptance has thus emerged as a critical determinant of the

success or failure of such projects, often rivaling technical feasibility and financial viability in importance (Lin & Kant, 2021).

Traditionally, public communication regarding infrastructure development has been conducted through formal channels such as public hearings, official announcements, mass media coverage, and government reports (Calle Mendoza, 2025; Mgawadere & Manda, 2025). However, these conventional top-down communication approaches have increasingly been criticized for their limited interactivity, lack of transparency, and inability to adequately address citizens' concerns. In recent years, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the way information is produced, disseminated, and consumed in society (Howe, Uyl-de Groot, & Wehrens, 2025). Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, and region-specific applications now play a central role in shaping public discourse on urban development issues. Social media communication enables real-time information sharing, bidirectional interaction, and the amplification of diverse voices, thereby redefining the relationship between public authorities, project developers, and citizens (Balakrishnan, Elayan, Sykora, Solter, Feick, Hewitt, Liu, & Shankardass, 2023).

The growing influence of social media in the context of urban governance has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Researchers have examined how social media facilitates civic engagement, enhances government transparency, and supports participatory decision-making processes (khaniki & khojir, 2019). At the same time, social media has been associated with the rapid spread of misinformation, emotional polarization, and the escalation of public opposition to infrastructure projects. As a result, the impact of social media communication on public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects remains complex and multifaceted (Costa, García-Esparza, & Kimic, 2024). While effective communication strategies on social media may build trust, increase perceived benefits, and foster public support, poorly managed or unresponsive communication can intensify skepticism and resistance (khojir & khaniki, 2019).

Public acceptance of infrastructure projects is a multidimensional construct influenced by a range of psychological, social, and institutional factors. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of perceived project benefits, perceived risks, trust in authorities, procedural fairness, and social norms in shaping public attitudes (Pianese & Vesperi, 2025). With the rise of social media, new factors such as information credibility, interactivity, transparency, emotional tone, and peer influence have become increasingly relevant. Social media communication does not merely transmit information; it actively shapes perceptions, frames narratives, and influences collective attitudes through social interaction and algorithm-driven visibility. Understanding how these communication-dynamics translate into public acceptance is therefore essential for both theory and practice (Radtke, 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on social media and public participation (Chenhao Zhang, 2024), several research gaps remain. First, many existing studies rely on qualitative case studies or descriptive analyses of social media content, which, while insightful, offer limited explanatory power regarding causal relationships among key variables. Second, empirical studies often examine isolated factors–such as trust or risk perception–without adequately capturing the complex interrelationships among communication characteristics, mediating psychological constructs, and acceptance outcomes (Ouyang & Bai, 2025). Third, there is a lack of integrative theoretical models that systematically explain how social media communication influences public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects across different contexts (Khojir & Khaniki, 2019).

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) provides a robust methodological framework to address these gaps. SEM enables the simultaneous examination of multiple latent constructs and their interrelationships, allowing researchers to test complex theoretical models that incorporate both direct and indirect effects. In the context of social media communication and public acceptance, SEM is particularly well-suited for modeling how communication attributes (e.g., transparency, interactivity, credibility) influence mediating variables such as trust, perceived benefits, and perceived risks, which in turn shape acceptance intentions or supportive behaviors. By adopting an SEM approach, this study moves beyond simple correlation analysis and offers a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which social media communication affects public acceptance (Alvarado Vazquez, Madureira, Ostermann, & Pfeffer, 2024; Jiang, Qiang, & Lin, 2016; Mushkani & Koseki, 2025; Rozema, 2014; Monadi, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws upon and integrates insights from communication theory, public acceptance theory, and technology-mediated participation literature. Communication theories emphasize the role of message framing, source credibility, and interaction in shaping attitudes and beliefs (Purohit, Buntain, Hughes, Peterson, Lorini, & Castillo, 2025). Public acceptance and social acceptance frameworks highlight the importance of trust, fairness, and perceived outcomes in gaining societal support for large-scale projects. Meanwhile, social media scholarship underscores the distinctive features of digital platforms, including user-generated content, network effects, and rapid feedback loops. By synthesizing these perspectives, the present research develops a comprehensive conceptual model that explains public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects in the era of social media (Huang & Tu, 2025; Slingerland & Hansen, 2025; Stewart, Bleumers, & Van Looy, 2013).

The practical implications of this research are equally significant. Urban infrastructure projects often involve substantial public investment and long-term societal impacts. Failure to secure public acceptance can lead to costly delays, redesigns, or project cancellations. Understanding how social media communication strategies influence public attitudes can help policymakers, planners, and project developers design more effective engagement approaches. Rather than viewing social media as a risk or a source of opposition, stakeholders can leverage it as a strategic tool to enhance transparency, build trust, and foster constructive dialogue with the public.

Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to investigate the impact of social media communication on public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects using a Structural Equation Modelling approach. Specifically, the study aims to (i) identify key dimensions of social media communication relevant to infrastructure project contexts, (ii) examine the mediating roles of trust, perceived benefits, and perceived risks, and (iii) empirically test a comprehensive model explaining public acceptance. By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to the growing literature on digital governance and urban infrastructure development while offering actionable insights for practitioners.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the theoretical framework and research hypotheses. The subsequent section outlines the research methodology, including data collection, measurement instruments, and the SEM analysis procedure. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of empirical results. Finally, the paper concludes with key findings, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of social media communication on public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects. A survey-based approach was employed to collect primary data from urban residents, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships among latent constructs. SEM is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple interrelated dependence relationships and accounts for measurement error in latent variables.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in theories of public communication, technology-mediated engagement, and infrastructure acceptance. Social media communication is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing information quality, transparency, interactivity, and responsiveness. Public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects is treated as a latent outcome variable, reflecting citizens' support, trust, and willingness to endorse project implementation. The model posits that effective social media communication positively influences public acceptance both directly and indirectly through mediating variables such as perceived transparency and public trust. The hypothesized relationships were tested using SEM to evaluate both the measurement and structural components of the model.

Measurement Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two main sections. The first section captured respondents' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education level, and frequency of social media use. The second section measured the latent constructs included in the research model. All constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales adapted from established literature on social media communication, public participation, and infrastructure acceptance. Items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

- **Social Media Communication (SMC):** Measured through indicators related to clarity of information, timeliness of updates, interactivity, and responsiveness of project authorities on social media platforms.
- **Perceived Transparency (PT):** Assessed by items capturing the extent to which project-related information is perceived as open, accessible, and honest.
- **Public Trust (TR):** Measured through respondents' confidence in project authorities and perceived credibility of information shared via social media.
- **Public Acceptance (PA):** Measured by citizens' support for the project, perceived legitimacy, and willingness to endorse project implementation.

Prior to full data collection, the questionnaire was pilot tested to ensure clarity, reliability, and content validity. Minor wording adjustments were made based on feedback.

Data Collection and Sample

The study targeted residents living in urban areas where major infrastructure projects were planned or under development. Data were collected through an online survey, distributed via social media platforms and community networks to ensure relevance to the research context. A non-probability sampling technique (e.g., purposive or convenience sampling) was employed due to the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on active social media users. Responses were screened for completeness and consistency before analysis. After data cleaning, a final sample size adequate for SEM analysis was retained, meeting commonly recommended thresholds for model estimation and statistical power.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted in two main stages using SEM software SmartPLS.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to assess reliability and validity of the constructs. Internal consistency reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). Convergent validity was assessed through factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity was evaluated using established criteria such as the Fornell–Larcker criterion and cross-loadings.

Structural Model Assessment

Once the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, the structural model was tested to examine the hypothesized relationships. Path coefficients, t-values, and significance levels were analyzed to assess the strength and direction of relationships between constructs. Model fit indices (e.g., CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR) were used to evaluate the overall fit of the model. Mediation effects were tested using bootstrapping procedures, allowing for robust estimation of indirect effects without assuming normality.

Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 520 questionnaires were distributed through online platforms. After removing incomplete and inconsistent responses, 462 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, yielding a response usability rate of 88.8%. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirements for Structural Equation Modelling and provides sufficient statistical power. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of 251 males (54.3%) and 211 females (45.7%). Most respondents were between 26 and 35 years old (39.2%), followed by those aged 18–25 (27.9%). A majority of respondents held at least an undergraduate degree (71.6%), and 82.5% reported daily use of social media platforms, confirming the relevance of the sample to the study context.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 462)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	251	54.3
	Female	211	45.7
Age	18–25	129	27.9
	26–35	181	39.2
	36–45	96	20.8
	>45	56	12.1
Education	Secondary or below	131	28.4
	Undergraduate	214	46.3
	Postgraduate	117	25.3
Social Media Use	Daily	381	82.5
	Weekly	81	17.5

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated prior to testing the structural relationships to ensure adequate reliability and validity of all latent constructs.

Reliability and Convergent Validity

All standardized factor loadings were above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong item reliability. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded 0.80, confirming high internal consistency. Additionally, all average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Social Media Communication (SMC)	4	0.73–0.86	0.88	0.91	0.72
Perceived Transparency (PT)	3	0.75–0.85	0.84	0.89	0.68
Public Trust (TR)	3	0.77–0.88	0.87	0.90	0.75
Public Acceptance (PA)	4	0.71–0.84	0.86	0.90	0.69

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As shown in Table 3, the square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, indicating adequate discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	SMC	PT	TR	PA
SMC	**0.85**			
PT	0.61	**0.82**		
TR	0.58	0.64	**0.87**	
PA	0.55	0.60	0.67	**0.83**

Note: Diagonal values represent the square root of AVE.

Structural Model Evaluation

Following confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships. The model demonstrated a good fit with the data, as indicated by commonly reported goodness-of-fit indices.

Table 4. Structural Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Threshold	Observed Value
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.18
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.94
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.93
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.054
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.046

Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized paths were examined using standardized path coefficients (β), t-values, and significance levels. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Structural Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	SMC → PA	0.26	4.37	<0.001	Supported
H2	SMC → PT	0.63	11.02	<0.001	Supported
H3	PT → PA	0.28	5.12	<0.001	Supported
H4	SMC → TR	0.59	10.14	<0.001	Supported
H5	TR → PA	0.36	6.78	<0.001	Supported

The results indicate that social media communication has a significant direct effect on public acceptance, as well as strong positive effects on perceived transparency and public trust.

Mediation Analysis

Mediation effects were tested using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The indirect effects of social media communication on public acceptance through both mediators were statistically significant.

Table 6. Mediation Effects

Indirect Path	Indirect Effect	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
SMC → PT → PA	0.18	4.91	<0.001	Partial
SMC → TR → PA	0.21	5.46	<0.001	Partial

These findings confirm that perceived transparency and public trust partially mediate the relationship between social media communication and public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects.

Explained Variance

The structural model demonstrated substantial explanatory power. Social media communication explained 40% of the variance in perceived transparency ($R^2 = 0.40$) and 35% of the variance in public trust ($R^2 = 0.35$). Collectively, the model explained 54% of the variance in public acceptance ($R^2 = 0.54$), indicating a strong predictive capability.

Discussion

This study examined how social media communication influences public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects using a Structural Equation Modelling approach. The results provide robust empirical evidence that social media is not merely an information dissemination tool but a strategic governance mechanism that shapes transparency, trust, and ultimately public acceptance. The findings contribute both theoretically and practically to the growing literature on digital public engagement and urban infrastructure governance.

Social Media Communication and Public Acceptance

The results demonstrate a significant direct relationship between social media communication and public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that when project authorities communicate effectively through social media—by providing timely, clear, and interactive information—citizens are more likely to support infrastructure initiatives. This direct effect highlights the ability of social media to reduce informational asymmetries and foster a sense of inclusion in project development processes. This result aligns with and extends prior research emphasizing the role of digital communication in enhancing public support for large-scale urban projects. However, this study advances existing knowledge by empirically confirming this relationship within a comprehensive SEM framework that simultaneously accounts for mediating mechanisms. Thus, social media communication emerges not only as a supplementary communication channel but as a determinant of social legitimacy for infrastructure development (Khan Mohammadi & Kaveh, 2019; Monadi & Ghahremani, 2025; Sun, 2025; Sun, et al., 2025).

The Role of Perceived Transparency

The strong positive effect of social media communication on perceived transparency ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that social media platforms significantly enhance citizens' perceptions of openness and accountability in infrastructure planning. This finding underscores the capacity of social media to make complex project information more accessible and understandable to the public. Moreover, perceived transparency was found to significantly influence public acceptance ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its role as a critical psychological mechanism through which communication translates into acceptance. The mediation analysis further revealed that perceived transparency partially mediates the relationship between social media communication and public acceptance. This suggests that while social media directly affects acceptance, a substantial portion of its influence operates by enhancing transparency perceptions. These results support theoretical perspectives on participatory governance, which argue that transparency is a prerequisite for public legitimacy. By empirically demonstrating this mechanism, the study provides concrete evidence that transparency is not an abstract governance ideal but a measurable and influential outcome of digital communication practices.

Social Media Communication as a Trust-Building Mechanism

The findings also reveal a strong relationship between social media communication and public trust ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). This result highlights the importance of consistent and credible communication in building confidence in project authorities. Social media platforms enable two-way interactions, allowing authorities to address concerns, correct misinformation, and demonstrate responsiveness, all of which contribute to trust formation. Public trust, in turn, exerted the strongest influence on public acceptance among the mediators ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). This underscores trust as a central determinant of citizens' willingness to support urban infrastructure projects, particularly those associated with long-term disruptions or uncertainty. The mediation analysis confirmed that public trust partially mediates the relationship between social media communication and public acceptance, reinforcing the notion that trust is a key pathway through which digital communication exerts its influence. This finding extends existing literature by quantitatively validating trust as a mediating construct in the context of infrastructure communication, an area that has often been discussed conceptually but less frequently tested empirically using advanced modelling techniques (Monadi, 2025).

Integrated Effects and Model Explanatory Power

The model explains 54% of the variance in public acceptance, indicating a high level of explanatory power for social science research. This suggests that social media communication, transparency, and trust collectively form a robust explanatory framework for understanding public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects. The

partial mediation effects observed for both transparency and trust indicate that public acceptance is shaped by both rational evaluations (e.g., access to transparent information) and relational factors (e.g., trust in authorities). This integrated perspective contributes to urban governance theory by demonstrating that effective infrastructure communication must address both informational and relational dimensions simultaneously (Alhassan, 2024; Yao & Gillen, 2023).

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it extends infrastructure acceptance research by incorporating digital communication theory into urban planning and governance contexts. Second, it empirically validates a multidimensional model that links social media communication to acceptance through transparency and trust, thereby enriching the conceptualization of public engagement mechanisms. Third, the use of SEM allows for a nuanced understanding of direct and indirect effects, advancing methodological rigor in this research domain (Mgawadere & Manda, 2025; Stuhm, Baumann, & Weil, 2025).

Practical and Policy Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that urban authorities and project developers should treat social media communication as a core component of infrastructure governance strategies, rather than as an auxiliary public relations tool. Transparent information sharing, timely updates, and responsive engagement on social media can significantly enhance public trust and acceptance. Policy-makers should consider institutionalizing social media engagement guidelines for infrastructure projects, ensuring consistency, accuracy, and accountability in digital communication. Investment in communication capacity and training for public officials may yield substantial returns in terms of reduced opposition and increased project legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of social media communication on public acceptance of urban infrastructure projects using a Structural Equation Modelling approach. Drawing on survey data from urban residents, the findings demonstrate that social media communication plays a critical and multifaceted role in shaping public acceptance. Specifically, effective social media communication was found to exert a significant direct influence on public acceptance, as well as indirect influences through perceived transparency and public trust. The results highlight perceived transparency and public trust as key mediating mechanisms, confirming that citizens are more likely to support infrastructure projects when communication via social media is open, credible, and responsive. Among these mediators, public trust emerged as the strongest predictor of public acceptance, underscoring the importance of relational factors in infrastructure governance. Collectively, the model explained a substantial proportion of variance in public acceptance, indicating strong explanatory power and validating the robustness of the proposed framework. By integrating digital communication theory with urban infrastructure acceptance research, this study advances scholarly understanding of how technology-mediated communication reshapes citizen–government relationships. Methodologically, the application of Structural Equation Modelling provides a rigorous empirical foundation for examining complex, multi-dimensional interactions, contributing to the growing body of quantitative research in urban governance and public engagement. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that urban authorities and project developers should strategically leverage social media as an essential governance tool. Transparent information dissemination, continuous engagement, and responsiveness to public concerns on social media platforms can enhance trust, reduce resistance, and foster greater public acceptance of urban infrastructure initiatives.

Future Research Directions

While this study offers important insights, several avenues for future research remain. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture changes in public perceptions over time. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how social media communication strategies influence public acceptance at different stages of infrastructure project development. Second, this research focused primarily on the positive dimensions of social media communication. Future work may explore the role of negative communication dynamics, such as misinformation, online conflict, or polarized discourse, and their potential to undermine trust and acceptance. Third, comparative studies across different cultural, institutional, or national contexts would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Public expectations of transparency and trust may vary significantly across governance systems, suggesting the value of cross-country or cross-city analyses. Fourth, future research could extend the model by incorporating additional constructs such as perceived risk, procedural fairness, environmental concern, or citizen participation intensity. Integrating qualitative approaches alongside SEM could also provide deeper insights into how citizens interpret and respond to social media communication. Finally, future studies may examine differences across social media platforms and communication formats, such

as text-based updates, visual content, or interactive tools, to identify platform-specific effects on public acceptance.

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