The impact of social media on public perceptions of corruption in Vietnam

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of social media on public perceptions of corruption in Vietnam, a context characterized by rapid digital transformation. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 200 social media users in Ho Chi Minh City, the research examines how the frequency of social media use and exposure to anti-corruption content shape citizens' subjective assessments of corruption. Utilizing multivariate linear regression and bootstrap-based mediation analysis, the findings reveal that both social media usage frequency and exposure to anti-corruption content are positively associated with heightened perceptions of corruption. Moreover, exposure to anti-corruption narratives partially mediates the relationship between social media use and corruption perceptions. These results underscore the critical role of digital platforms in fostering informal oversight and public accountability in semi-authoritarian regimes. The study contributes to the growing literature on media effects and governance in Southeast Asia and offers policy implications for leveraging digital communication in anti-corruption strategies.

Keywords: Social media; corruption perception; anti-corruption content; Vietnam; digital governance; political communication; quantitative research; public accountability; mediation analysis; civic engagement.

1. Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most persistent and detrimental challenges facing Vietnam, with wide-ranging consequences for public governance, economic development, and citizen trust in institutions. Although the Government has implemented a series of institutional reforms, anti-corruption campaigns, and legal frameworks aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability, the problem continues to undermine public confidence and hinder effective state functioning. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published by Transparency International, Vietnam scored 42 out of 100 in 2023, indicating that despite some progress, the perceived level of corruption remains considerable.

In this context, the role of information and communication technologies - particularly social media - has become increasingly prominent in shaping public perceptions and discourses

surrounding corruption. Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed the landscape of information dissemination in Vietnam, offering spaces for civic engagement and informal oversight that often bypass the editorial constraints of traditional, state-managed media (Le et al., 2021). These platforms not only facilitate the rapid spread of corruption-related content, including whistleblower accounts, investigative reporting, and public commentary, but also allow for real-time interaction and viral mobilization. As such, they have emerged as both enablers of transparency and arenas of contestation over narratives of state legitimacy and accountability (Bui, 2016).

While a growing body of literature has examined the role of media and digital technologies in anti-corruption efforts globally (Bertot et al, 2010; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015), relatively few studies have adopted a quantitative approach to assess how social media influences citizen perceptions of corruption in the Vietnamese context. Given Vietnam's hybrid media system - characterized by state control alongside increasing digital liberalization - this constitutes an important research gap.

This study aims to address that gap by quantitatively examining the relationship between social media usage and public perceptions of corruption in Vietnam. Specifically, it responses to corruption. By analyzing survey data collected from a diverse sample of Vietnamese social media users, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the extent to which digital media ecosystems shape political perceptions and civic attitudes in transitional governance settings.

The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the study enriches the discourse on digital accountability mechanisms and the role of public opinion in anti-corruption frameworks. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers, civil society actors, and journalists on leveraging digital platforms to enhance public oversight, promote transparency, and foster citizen engagement in anti-corruption initiatives in Vietnam.

2. Literature review

Social media usage frequency has emerged as a critical factor in understanding how individuals consume political information and form perceptions about governance. The growing ubiquity of digital platforms - particularly in developing and transitional societies - has reshaped patterns of political communication. *Frequent social media* use is associated not only with increased exposure to diverse sources of information but also with enhanced opportunities for engagement in civic discourse (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, where traditional media is often tightly regulated, social media provides a relatively open space for public discussion, especially on sensitive topics such as corruption. In the Vietnamese context, platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become the primary channels for political expression and information-seeking among younger, urban populations (Le et al., 2024). As users interact more frequently with these platforms, their likelihood of encountering politically relevant content, including corruption allegations, increases accordingly. Consequently, frequency of social media use may serve as a key antecedent to political awareness, including perceptions of transparency and accountability.

Closely related to social media use is *exposure to anti-corruption content,* which has attracted scholarly attention as a distinct variable with meaningful behavioral and perceptual consequences. Anti-corruption content can take many forms, including investigative journalism, viral videos of misconduct, citizen reports, and public discussions calling for institutional reform. Such exposure may increase public sensitivity to unethical behavior, heighten expectations of government accountability, and foster normative beliefs about corruption (Bertot at al., 2010). Prior studies suggest that individuals who encounter frequent anti-corruption narratives on digital platforms tend to become

more critical of government institutions and more supportive of transparency-enhancing initiatives. In Vietnam, anecdotal evidence suggests that social media has played a catalytic role in exposing high-profile corruption scandals and mobilizing public discourse around them. However, systematic measurement of exposure to such content - particularly its frequency and perceived credibility - remains underexplored in quantitative studies within the Vietnamese setting.

The third core variable in this study is the *perceived level of corruption,* which reflects the public's subjective assessment of the extent and severity of corruption within a given political system. Perception-based measures are widely used in comparative governance research, particularly in contexts where objective data on corruption is limited or unavailable (Treisman, 2007). These perceptions have tangible consequences: they influence political trust, voter behavior, tax compliance, and overall confidence in public institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Seligson, 2002). In Vietnam, where anti-corruption campaigns have been prominently featured in state narratives, the public remains skeptical about the consistency and impartiality of enforcement efforts. Studies suggest that while citizens may recognize the government's rhetorical commitment to fighting corruption, their personal perceptions are shaped more by lived experience and independent media reports than by official discourse (To & Dressler, 2025). Given the fragmented nature of information sources in Vietnam, perceived corruption may therefore be heavily influenced by the types of content individuals consume - particularly on social media - and the extent to which they engage with discussions about public sector misconduct.

Although these three variables have been individually examined in previous research across various national contexts, their interrelationships remain underexplored in Vietnam's rapidly evolving digital media environment. Most existing studies have focused on descriptive analyses or theoretical discussions without employing robust quantitative methodologies to test causal or correlational links. This study helps fill this gap by investigating the extent to which the frequency of social media use and exposure to anti-corruption content predict perceived levels of corruption among Vietnamese citizens. The findings aim to inform both academic theory on media effects in constrained political environments and practical strategies for leveraging digital communication in anti-corruption initiatives.

Based on the literature review and the three core variables - social media usage frequency, exposure to anti-corruption content, and perceived level of corruption - below are research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Social media usage frequency is positively associated with perceived levels of corruption.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Exposure to anti-corruption content on social media is positively associated with perceived levels of corruption.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Exposure to anti-corruption content mediates the relationship between social media usage frequency and perceived levels of corruption.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between social media usage frequency, exposure to anti-corruption content, and perceived levels of corruption among Vietnamese citizens. A quantitative approach is particularly appropriate for testing theory-driven hypotheses and identifying predictive relationships between latent constructs. The design facilitates the collection of standardized data across a broad demographic, enabling multivariate statistical analysis of how media consumption behaviors influence political perceptions.

The target population comprises Vietnamese citizens aged 20 and above who are active social media users. A convenience sampling method was employed to recruit participants, utilizing digital platforms such as

Facebook, Zalo, and university mailing lists. Although this non-probability sampling technique limits generalizability, it is widely accepted in exploratory research aimed at identifying behavioral patterns within a specific user population. Data were collected in Ho Chi Minh City - Vietnam's most populous and digitally connected urban center - during the early months of 2025. A total of 200 valid responses were obtained and retained for analysis. This sample size meets the commonly recommended thresholds for conducting Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and multivariate linear regression analysis, which typically require five to ten observations per estimated parameter (Hair et al., 2019).

The survey instrument was developed and administered using Google Forms. Respondents were required to read and agree to an informed consent statement explaining the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and assurance of anonymity. The questionnaire consisted of four major sections: demographic characteristics, frequency of social media use, exposure to anti-corruption content, and perceived level of corruption. All core constructs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"), consistent with standard practices in attitudinal research.

Social media usage frequency was assessed using items adapted from Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) that captured how often respondents used platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to access political or governance-related content. Exposure to anti-corruption content was measured using items derived from Bertot et al. (2010) and Stoycheff (2016), focusing on the frequency with which participants encountered, shared, or engaged with corruption-related content on social media. Perceived corruption was measured using statements adapted from Seligson (2002) and Treisman (2007) that reflect respondents' subjective evaluations of corruption prevalence and institutional integrity in Vietnam. Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted to ensure item clarity and internal consistency. Minor wording adjustments were made based on participant feedback to improve contextual relevance.

Data were analyzed using the R language. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize the demographic profile and the distributions of the variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of all multi-item constructs, with values of 0.70 or above indicating acceptable reliability. EFA was conducted using Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation to assess the one-dimensionality and factor structure of the scales.

To test the proposed hypotheses (H1-H3), a multivariate linear regression model was employed. Specifically, the perceived level of corruption was entered as the dependent variable, while social media usage frequency and exposure to anti-corruption content served as independent variables. The mediating effect of exposure to anti-corruption content on the relationship between social media usage and perceived corruption was tested using the bootstrap method with 5,000 resamples, following the procedure recommended by Preacher & Hayes (2008). The bootstrap technique enables robust estimation of indirect effects by generating confidence intervals that do not rely on the assumption of normality. A statistically significant indirect path, as indicated by a 95% confidence interval that does not include zero, was interpreted as evidence of mediation.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic profile of respondents

The final sample consisted of 200 valid respondents residing in Ho Chi Minh City. Of these, 54% were female, and 46% were male. The majority of participants were aged 20 - 29 years (58%), followed by 30 - 39 years (27%), 40 - 49 years (10%), and 50 years or older (5%). Regarding education, 72% held a university degree, 18% had a postgraduate qualification, and 10% had completed high school or vocational training. Approximately 85% reported using social media daily, with Facebook and YouTube being the most

frequently accessed platforms for political and governance-related content.

4.2. Reliability and validity of constructs

To evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the study, Cronbach's alpha and mean corrected item - total correlations were calculated for each latent construct. As shown in *Table 1,* all three constructs - Social Media Usage Frequency, Exposure to Anti-Corruption Content, and Perceived Level of Corruption - achieved Cronbach's alpha values above the widely

accepted threshold of 0.70 (Razzaq, 2022), indicating strong internal reliability. Additionally, the mean corrected item - total correlations for all constructs ranged from 0.58 to 0.65, suggesting that the items within each scale demonstrate moderate to strong coherence with their respective total scale scores.

These results affirm that the items are sufficiently homogeneous and measure consistent underlying constructs. The reliability values support the use of these scales for subsequent exploratory factor and regression analyses.

Table 1. Internal consistency and corrected item - total correlation of constructs

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean corrected item - total correlation
Social Media Usage Frequency	4	0.81	0.61
Exposure to Anti-Corruption Content	4	0.84	0.65
Perceived Level of Corruption	4	0.79	0.58

Note: All Cronbach's alpha values exceed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70. Mean corrected item - total correlations fall within the recommended range of 0.50 - 0.70, indicating satisfactory item - level consistency (Razzaq, 2022).

4.3. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Table 2 presents the results of the exploratory factor analysis, which identify a clear and coherent three-factor structure: social media use (SM Use), exposure to anti-corruption content (Anti-Corr Exposure), and perceptions of corruption (Corr Perception). All items load firmly on their respective factors, with factor loadings ranging from 0.71 to 0.82, exceeding the acceptable threshold and indicating good item reliability. The first factor, SM Use, captures users' engagement with political and governmental information on social media, showing consistently high loadings across behaviors such as following government pages and checking political news. The second factor, Anti-Corr Exposure, reflects the extent to which

respondents encounter corruption-related content, including posts, videos, and discussions on public misconduct, with strong loadings demonstrating that this content forms a distinct experiential dimension. The third factor, Corr Perception, groups together beliefs about the prevalence, severity, and accountability of corruption, showing a stable attitudinal construct. Overall, the results suggest that respondents clearly differentiate between the general political use of social media, exposure to corruption content, and their attitudes toward corruption. The lack of cross-loadings and the strength of all factor loadings provide strong preliminary support for the validity of the measurement model and justify proceeding to confirmatory factor analysis.

4.4. Regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the three hypotheses. The dependent variable was Perceived Level of Corruption, and the independent variables were Social Media Usage Frequency and Exposure to Anti-Corruption Content. Mediation was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 4), with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The results *(Table 3)* show that both social media usage frequency and exposure to anti-corruption content significantly predicted perceived corruption levels. Moreover, exposure to anti-corruption content partially mediated the relationship between social media usage and perceived corruption, supporting Hypotheses H1-H3.

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis results

Item	Factor 1: Social media use	Factor 2: Anti-corruption exposure	Factor 3: Corruption perception
I use social media to follow political news	0.79		
I check social media daily for government info	0.76		
I follow government pages on Facebook	0.74		
I watch political news on YouTube	0.71		
I often see posts about corruption		0.82	
I share or comment on corruption content		0.78	
I follow pages discussing public misconduct		0.75	
I encounter videos about anti-corruption		0.73	
I believe corruption is widespread			0.80
Corruption is present at all government levels			0.77
Public officials are rarely held accountable			0.75
Anti-corruption efforts are ineffective			0.72

Table 3. Regression and mediation analysis results

Path	β (Standardized)	SE	t	p-value	Result
H1: Social media usage → perceived corruption	0.28	0.07	4.00	< .001	Supported
H2: Exposure → perceived corruption	0.42	0.06	5.83	< .001	Supported
H3: Social media usage → exposure (mediator)	0.51	0.05	7.92	< .001	Supported
Indirect effect (Bootstrapped)	0.21	-	-	95% CI: [0.13, 0.31]	Mediation confirmed

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the growing body of literature that emphasizes the role of social media as a catalyst for public scrutiny and governmental accountability. Specifically, the analysis confirmed that both the frequency of social media usage and exposure to anti-corruption content are positively associated with citizens' perceptions of corruption in Vietnam. These results underscore the capacity of digital platforms to shape political awareness and amplify public concerns over transparency and institutional integrity.

Consistent with global research on digital activism and online political behavior, the results suggest that individuals who frequently engage with social media are more likely to encounter content that challenges official narratives and exposes governance shortcomings (Bertot et al., 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). The positive correlation between social media activity and perceived corruption levels reflects the unique communicative affordances of these platforms, particularly their ability to bypass traditional media controls and facilitate decentralized information sharing. In this way, social media not only functions as a channel for political expression but also empowers citizens to become active participants in accountability processes.

Moreover, the finding that exposure to anti-corruption content mediates the relationship between social media use and perceived corruption highlights the instrumental role of content type in shaping political attitudes. It is not merely the frequency of digital engagement that matters, but the nature of the content consumed. This nuance reinforces the view that social media can serve as a powerful tool for anti-corruption advocacy, particularly in settings like Vietnam where conventional mechanisms of public oversight may be limited or constrained.

Taken together, the results of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they contribute to the understanding of how digital media environments influence citizen perceptions in semi-authoritarian contexts. Practically, they point to the potential for civil society actors, investigative journalists, and public interest organizations to leverage social media as a vehicle for enhancing transparency, mobilizing civic engagement, and fostering a culture of accountability in Vietnam.

6. Conclusion and policy implications

This study provides empirical evidence that social media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of corruption in Vietnam. Through a quantitative analysis of 200 Vietnamese social media users, the findings reveal that both the frequency of social media usage and exposure to anti-corruption content are positively associated with individuals' perceptions of corruption. Moreover, exposure to anti-corruption content serves as a mediating variable, amplifying the effect of social media usage on public awareness of governance failures. These results highlight the dynamic and multifaceted influence of digital platforms on political cognition and underscore the emergence of social media as a critical space for informal oversight in the Vietnamese governance landscape.

The implications of these findings are twofold. *First,* they suggest that policymakers and public institutions in Vietnam must acknowledge the strategic importance of digital communication channels in efforts to enhance transparency and public accountability. While the Government has made notable strides in administrative reform and high-profile anti-corruption campaigns, the impact of these efforts is increasingly filtered through - and often amplified by - online discourses. Therefore, anti-corruption strategies should not be limited to institutional enforcement mechanisms but should also include public-facing digital initiatives, such as open data platforms, citizen-reporting tools, and official engagement with social media communities. Integrating these approaches can help improve the credibility of reform

agendas, foster civic trust, and create more inclusive governance processes.

Second, the study emphasizes the need for constructive engagement with civil society actors, digital influencers, and independent content creators, who are increasingly shaping narratives on corruption and public integrity. Rather than viewing social media as a threat to political stability, government agencies and reform advocates could harness its potential to promote a culture of transparency, ethical governance, and responsive public administration.

While the present study offers important insights, it also points to several avenues for further research. Most notably, future studies should employ longitudinal designs to capture changes in public perception over time and to assess the causal dynamics between digital engagement and civic attitudes. Additionally, comparative regional studies across provinces or cities could help identify how socio-political contexts, digital literacy, and local governance practices mediate the impact of social media. Such analyses would deepen our understanding of the role of digital media in anti-corruption efforts and contribute to evidence-based policymaking across diverse institutional environments.

In conclusion, this study affirms that social media is not merely a communication tool but a powerful instrument of civic awareness and accountability. For Vietnam to build a more transparent and participatory governance model, both policymakers and researchers must continue to explore and leverage the evolving dynamics of digital engagement in the fight against corruption.

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