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Fostering Youth Trust in the European Commission: Communication on Social Media as a Key Strategy

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Abstract

For the long-term viability of the EU's democratic system, it is crucial to develop communication strategies aimed at enhancing young citizens' trust in its institutions, with social media playing a key role. This study is structured around two general objectives: (1) to examine youth political trust in the European Commission and its connection to various potential micro- and macro-determinants, and (2) to explore the categories of social media communication that young citizens perceive as potentially contributing to increasing political trust in the institution. Using a quantitative approach, data are collected from $N = 470$ individuals (aged 18 to 26) from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. Statistical analyses included binary logistic regression models, ordinal regressions, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and Dunn's post-hoc tests. Results indicate that socioeconomic status, employment status, and education are positively related to trust in the institution, while perceptions of the possibility of citizen participation and economic performance also exhibit a positive association. Among social media communication categories, input-seeking and dialogue-based approaches show the greatest perceived potential, both among young citizens who distrust the Commission and those who trust it. These findings provide valuable insights for designing social media communication strategies aimed at strengthening political trust in the institution, from the perspective of audience targeting and content strategy.

Keywords

communication; democracy; European Commission; European Union; political trust; social media; youth

1. Introduction

The EU is facing a crisis of political and institutional trust, exacerbated since the Euro-crisis of 2009 (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017). This phenomenon poses a challenge for the supranational

body's institutions, as citizen distrust undermines their legitimacy, reduces the effectiveness of the adopted public policies, and weakens civic engagement (Hetherington, 1998; Zmerli, 2024).

Within this crisis of trust, young Europeans play a crucial role. Their attitudes toward the political class and democratic political institutions directly influence their current and future civic engagement and political understanding. This, in turn, affects the viability and sustainability of democratic systems in the long term (Levine, 2007). In this regard, Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) suggest that the decline in political support and institutional trust, especially among younger populations, contributes to the "deconsolidation" of democracy.

Given the significance of the issue, the first general objective (GO1) of this article is to examine youth political trust in the European Commission and its connection to various potential micro- and macro-determinants. The study focuses on residents aged 18 to 26 from the five most populous countries in the EU: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. The analysis explores variations based on four sociodemographic variables as micro-determinants. These are socioeconomic status, employment status, education level, and country of residence. It also takes into account two macro-determinants, which refer to perception of institutional performance and perception of the quality of democratic processes.

However, this research seeks to go a step further and contribute to the development of strategies to increase political trust. In recent years, a line of research has emerged highlighting how communication from political institutions is a fundamental factor in the building or reinforcement of their political trust (Drakos et al., 2019; Garland, 2021), particularly through social media (Dong & Ji, 2018; Echeverría & Mani, 2020; Jamal et al., 2023; Porumbescu, 2016).

With this in mind, the second general objective (GO2) of this article is to explore the categories of communication on social media that young Europeans perceive as potentially contributing to increasing political trust in the European Commission, under the assumption that such communications are conducted by the institution itself. To this end, the same population as in GO1 is considered appropriate. To establish differences based on the content, the classification proposed by DePaula et al. (2018) is used. The authors distinguish between communication on social media from political institutions oriented towards: information provision, input seeking, online dialogue, offline interaction, and symbolic presentation.

The main contribution of this study is based on the collection of valuable information for designing communication strategies aimed at increasing political trust between young Europeans and the Commission, thereby contributing to the development of a more robust and representative European democratic system. Both the characterization of political trust among young citizens in the European Commission, including its relationship with relevant determinants, and the analysis of the categories of social media communication that they perceive as having the greatest potential to enhance political trust in the institution, provide valuable insights for developing such strategies. When evaluated together, these insights can inform the creation of well-targeted communication strategies in terms of audience and content.

The main distinguishing element of this research lies in its approach: collective from the perspective of the respondents, but individual from the viewpoint of the institution whose political trust is being evaluated. While studies generally measure the trust of a geographically defined population (e.g., a specific country or region) toward various institutions, this article, based on the multidimensional conception of political trust, aims to

do precisely the opposite: to analyze political trust in a specific political institution, taking into account the perspectives of five different countries. Another distinguishing aspect stems from the availability of original data, which allows for the establishment of different lines of analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is structured in two parts: the first reviews literature on political trust in Europe, focusing on determinants relevant to GO1; the second explores how communication from political institutions on social media influences political trust, and defines the categories analyzed in GO2.

2.1. Political Trust and Its Determinants in the European Context

In its broadest sense, political trust refers to citizens' positive evaluations of political institutions and representatives, grounded in attributes such as competence, credibility, fairness, and transparency. It reflects confidence that these entities or actors will adhere to ethical standards and uphold democratic principles, even amidst uncertainty (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Zmerli, 2024). As a midrange indicator, it bridges the relationship between political actors and democratic values (Zmerli, 2024), ensuring the legitimacy of institutions (Bauer & Freitag, 2017; Hetherington, 1998).

The importance of political trust is often understood through its impact on the stability and effectiveness of democratic systems, as it facilitates citizens' acceptance of institutional authority and their perception of these political institutions as legitimate (Hooghe et al., 2015; Mishler & Rose, 2005). This "legitimizing character" is a fundamental element as it influences various key areas. Examples include electoral participation (Devine, 2024), economic growth (Sumanjeet, 2015), the use of e-government services (Khan et al., 2020), and the implementation of adopted policies (Zmerli, 2024).

In relation to its determinants, after reviewing the existing literature, the most accepted way to evaluate them is by differentiating between their micro and macro nature.

2.1.1. Background on Micro-Determinants of Political Trust in the European Context

The group of micro-determinants is composed of sociodemographic variables. For this study, the longitudinal research by Schoon and Cheng (2011) is used as a reference. The potential micro-determinants defined as relevant to GO1 are: socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, along with the country of residence. The variables corresponding to gender and age are included solely as control variables, following the same procedure as Kołczyńska (2021).

One of the key studies on the impact of sociodemographic variables on political trust in European institutions is the research by Drakos et al. (2019), who analyze 240,000 observations from 28 countries. Their findings show a positive link between favorable socioeconomic conditions and trust in EU institutions, consistent with the results reported by Schoon and Cheng (2011). Similarly, individuals with stable employment tend to have more trust in these institutions, while those with precarious employment or unemployment tend to have a more negative outlook (Drakos et al., 2019; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). Regarding variations based on education, Kołczyńska (2020) indicates a positive relationship, particularly in the more established

democracies of Europe. Drakos et al. (2019) and Schoon et al. (2010) also find a connection between these variables, adding that the relationship becomes stronger once education is completed. Expanding on this idea, Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) suggest that education is negatively related to institutional trust in corrupt European societies, an idea later reinforced by van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017).

Complementarily, according to Stals et al. (2024), who conducted a comparative study across 15 countries, young Europeans from Germany and Nordic countries have the highest levels of political trust in European institutions. In contrast, countries located in the southern part of the continent show the lowest levels of political trust. The findings of Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) support the thesis that southern European countries exhibit the lowest levels of political trust in supranational institutions.

2.1.2. Background on Macro-Determinants of Political Trust in the European Context

Regarding the macro-determinants, two main interrelated factors are relevant to GO1: institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes, both measured through individual perceptions.

The first of the analyzed macro-determinants is institutional performance. Citizens base their trust on the degree of alignment between actions taken by the political institution and their expectations (Berg & Hjerm, 2010). Research exploring the relationship between political trust and institutional performance in the European context adopts two distinct approaches: objective relational analyses with macroeconomic indicators or analyses based on individuals' subjective evaluations. In studies that adopt the objective approach, the findings are divergent. Some authors find a positive relationship between variables (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Kołczyńska, 2021; Taylor, 2000), while others do not identify significant relationships (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Oskarsson, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). In contrast, in studies that analyze the relationship based on subjective evaluations, such as this article, there is a certain consensus that the political trust of European citizens correlates positively with their subjective economic performance evaluations of the political institution whose trust is being measured (e.g., Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011).

On the other hand, the quality of democratic processes, including transparency, absence of corruption, and possibility of citizen participation, also represents a macro-determinant, improving the sense of participation and civic responsibility (Kaasa & Andriani, 2022; van Elsas et al., 2020). In this case, there is alignment between research that explores the topic through objective parameters and that which does so based on subjective perceptions. Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014) note that European citizens show higher levels of trust in contexts of high democratic quality and integrity. Fundamentally, the explanation of this macro-determinant lies in the negative relationship between political trust and corruption, which is present in numerous studies (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Torcal & Christmann, 2021). In this sense, the findings of Breitenstein (2019) and Muñoz et al. (2016) are interesting, as they argue that ideological alignment with the members of the political entity being evaluated helps mitigate the loss of trust due to low quality in democratic processes.

Based on the analysis of the micro- and macro-determinants and in relation to GO1, the first hypothesis of the study is formulated:

H1: Political trust of young Europeans in the European Commission is significantly influenced by four sociodemographic variables (socioeconomic status, employment status, education, and country of residence) as well as by their perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes.

2.2. Social Media Communication by Political Institutions as a Tool to Increase Political Trust

Regardless of the influence exerted by different determinants on political trust, it is evident that it represents a significant issue in the European political landscape (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017). Research on potential ways to address the political trust crisis (e.g., Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Verhaegen et al., 2017) has taken numerous perspectives: the construction of European identity, the promotion of civic education, the development of citizen participation actions, etc. However, in recent years, the role of communication by political institutions, especially on social media, has gained importance in that sense (Garland, 2021; Porumbescu, 2016).

These communications refer to the strategic use of digital platforms by governments, political parties, and public institutions to disseminate information, engage with citizens, and promote transparency (Bertot et al., 2012; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). They are characterized by their adaptability to the immediacy and interactivity of social media, which demands a shift from traditional one-way communication models to more dynamic, bidirectional interactions (Campos Domínguez, 2024; Ruiz Soto, 2022). For institutional communication on social media to be effective, it relies on six traits: it must be transparent and accessible (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Mergel, 2013; Porumbescu, 2016); it should encourage bidirectional interaction (Dong & Ji, 2018; Mergel, 2013); it needs to be timely and responsive (Ruiz Soto, 2022); it requires strategic competence, ensuring integrity and professionalism; it should incorporate multimedia content (Alonso-López et al., 2024); and it must align with broader governance goals (Campos Domínguez, 2024).

From a general perspective, the importance of these communications lies in their ability to bridge the gap between political institutions and citizens (Foster & Frieden, 2017). Research shows that effective social media communication improves perceptions of institutional performance and democratic quality (Murni et al., 2024) and positively correlates with transparency and trust (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Poluan et al., 2022). Moreover, the use of social media by political actors has been found to encourage offline political participation among young citizens (Dong & Ji, 2018). Recognizing this potential, the EU increasingly leverages social media to engage citizens and strengthen European identity (Karantzeni & Gouscos, 2013).

One of the implications of institutional communication's importance is its relationship with political trust, which underpins the GO2 framework. Political trust is undeniably linked to the two macro-determinants presented, as it depends, along with other factors such as media exposure (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018), on citizens' perceptions of institutional performance and on the quality of democratic processes, both of which are shaped by the communicative effectiveness of actions and policies (Murni et al., 2024).

Recent research consistently highlights the pivotal role of social media communication in strengthening institutional trust. By making actions more accessible and transparent, social media increases citizen satisfaction and perceptions of institutional reliability (Bonsón et al., 2012; Porumbescu, 2016), particularly when it facilitates bidirectional, responsive interactions that encourage civic engagement (Dong & Ji, 2018).

This interactive dimension becomes even more crucial during crises, when transparent and empathetic communication helps maintain public trust (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies indicate that online dialogues between political institutions and citizens bridge the gap between them and reinforce accountability, as demonstrated by Campos Domínguez (2024). In this regard, timeliness is essential (Poluan et al., 2022; Ruiz Soto, 2022). Beyond accessibility and transparency, digital interactions also play a role in addressing broader issues of inequality. Palmisiano and Sacchi (2024) argue that they can reduce perceived institutional distance, mitigating the negative effects of socioeconomic disparities on trust. Weinberg (2024) highlights that authenticity further reinforces this effect. Taken together, these findings underscore social media's transformative potential in political communication, transparency, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions, ultimately fostering greater political trust.

2.2.1. Categories of Social Media Communication by Political Institutions

Considering the research approach proposed in GO2, it is necessary to establish a categorization of political institutions' social media communications. The classification used is the one proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). Specifically, the five categories of communication are utilized (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and types of social media communication by political institutions.

Category	Type	Description
		(Communication on social media oriented towards…)
Information provision	Public service announcements	Providing recommendations for safety, public health, and well-being
	Operations and events	Sharing content related to operations of the political institution, programs, and/or policy
	Social sharing	Providing content related to the mission of the political institution
Input seeking	Citizen information	Asking for feedback on a topic, participation in surveys or polls, or seeking input to solve a problem
	Fundraising	Asking for donations and contributions to a cause
Online dialogue	Online dialogue	Responding to online comments or other types of online direct interaction
Offline interaction	Offline discussion	Promoting events that discuss policy issues or inviting the community to meet institutional officials
	Offline collaboration	Inviting individuals to become involved in activities or volunteer
Symbolic presentation	Favorable presentation	Reporting positive activities done by the political institution
	Political positioning	Taking stances on political issues
	Symbolic act	Expressing congratulations, gratitude, or condolences
	Marketing	Elaborating on the features of items or services

Source: Adapted from DePaula et al. (2018).

The first category, information provision, is among the most common in institutional political communication on social media (Agostino, 2013). It focuses on the transmission of information about operations, events, and public service announcements (DePaula et al., 2018). It is closely linked to the democratic goals of transparency and openness (Harrison et al., 2012; Mergel, 2013). However, not all acts of public communication can be

considered transparent, which underlines the importance of accurate, relevant, and useful information (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021).

Input seeking constitutes the second category (DePaula et al., 2018). In this semi/asymmetric strategy, institutions interact partially with citizens to obtain information that can improve their services (Waters & Williams, 2011). Weinberg (2024) suggests that these forms of interactive democracy, when authentically implemented, can strengthen political trust, as citizens feel that their opinions are valued and taken into account. However, their effectiveness depends on the ability of institutions to use feedback in a meaningful way (Karantzeni & Gouscos, 2013).

Another category of communication, although very rarely used (DePaula et al., 2018), is online dialogue: direct interactions between political institutions and citizens through comments, responses, or conversations in social media. From a public relations perspective, it is considered the most beneficial for political organizations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). It allows citizens to establish a two-way dialogue, which, if authentic, will improve transparency, trust, and citizen engagement (Bonsón et al., 2012; Dong & Ji, 2018; Weinberg, 2024).

Communication oriented towards offline interaction, offering a more personal and tangible connection between institutions and citizens, also contributes to building trust (Bovaird, 2007; Weinberg, 2024). This category includes communications that invite citizens to participate in events, meetings, or collaborative activities. DePaula et al. (2018) distinguish between offline discussion and offline collaboration.

Finally, symbolic presentation refers to communications that seek to create a favorable image of the political institution. DePaula et al. (2018) base this category on Goffman's (1959) theory, the presentation of self in everyday life, where organizations (and individuals) seek to manage the impression they give to others, playing an important role in relationship building and public image management (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). However, Fairbanks et al. (2007) warn that these communications can be seen as manipulative if they are perceived as excessively self-promotional (Garnett, 1997).

Taking into account the above, the second hypothesis of the study is formulated, which is related to GO2:

> H2: Among the categories of social media communication by the European Commission, young Europeans perceive input seeking, online dialogue, and offline interaction as having the greatest potential to increase political trust, due to their emphasis on transparency, responsiveness, and interactive engagement.

3. Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives, a quantitative methodological approach is used. The scope of GO1 is descriptive-correlational and the scope of GO2 is exploratory.

3.1. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

The data collection technique used was a survey, implemented through an anonymous questionnaire. It was administered online between December 2024 and January 2025. To facilitate understanding of the questions, versions of the questionnaire were created in five languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Polish. The translations were done by certified translators. As the data were collected at a specific point in time, the design is cross-sectional.

3.1.1. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of individuals aged 18 to 26 residing in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland: approximately 32 million people. The selection of the five countries is based on population data; they are the five most populous countries in the EU and the only ones with populations exceeding 30 million inhabitants.

Since it is impossible to survey all individuals in the population, it is necessary to define a statistically representative sample size. With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, $n = 385$ is calculated as the minimum representative sample size. To respect the proportions of each country's population, a required minimum number of participants per country is determined, which must be reached in order for the sample to be considered valid: Germany $n = 119$, France $n = 96$, Italy $n = 86$, Spain $n = 68$, and Poland $n = 55$. The sampling method used is random; therefore, beyond the established minimum per country, no additional quotas or proportional constraints were applied. The recruitment process is carried out through an international first-party data platform specialized in scientific research.

The final sample comprises $N = 470$ subjects: 202 women (42.979%), 263 men (55.957%), and 5 (1.064%) others. In terms of age, there is a relatively balanced distribution across the nine age groups covered in the study. A total of 123 reside in Germany (26.170%), 116 in France (24.681%), 86 in Italy (18.298%), 85 in Spain (18.085%), and 60 in Poland (12.766%). Regarding socioeconomic status, 31 indicate lower (6.596%), 128 lower-middle (27.233%), 210 middle (44.681%), 87 middle-upper (18.511%), and 14 upper (2.979%). Regarding employment status, 89 are unemployed (18.936%), 192 are students (40.851%), 145 are employed (30.851%), and 44 are both students and employed (9.362%). Finally, in terms of education, 74 have primary education (15.745%), 281 have secondary education (59.787%), and 115 have tertiary education (24.468%).

3.1.2. Variables Measured

The questionnaire begins with two screening questions to confirm that respondents are between 18 and 26 years old and that they reside in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, or Poland. If either of these criteria is not met, the survey does not proceed, and the response is not counted. If the respondent meets both criteria, they continue to complete the questionnaire. The variables evaluated in it are divided into four blocks (see Table 2).

Table 2. Operationalization of the variables measured in the questionnaire.

Block I: Sociodemographic variables (potential micro-determinants in GO1)	
Variables (general information)	Operationalization
Gender	Categorical: woman/man/other
Age	Numerical: 18/19/20/21/22/23/24/25/26
Country of residence	Categorical: Germany/France/Italy/Spain/Poland
Socioeconomic status	Categorical: lower/lower-middle/middle/middle-upper/upper
Employment status	Categorical: unemployed/student/employed/student and employed
Education	Categorical: primary/secondary/tertiary
Block II. Variables related to the perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes of the European Commission (potential macro-determinants in GO1)	
Variables (perceptions)	Operationalization
Institutional efficiency	Numerical (scale): 0 (*not efficient at all*)–10 (*completely efficient*)
Economic performance	Numerical (scale): 0 (*completely deficient*)–10 (*optimal*)
Transparency	Numerical (scale): 0 (*not transparent at all*)–10 (*completely transparent*)
Absence of corruption	Numerical (scale): 0 (*completely corrupt*)–10 (*not corrupt at all*)
Possibility of citizen participation	Numerical (scale): 0 (*no possibilities*)–10 (*optimal possibilities*)
Block III: Variable related to political trust in the European Commission	
Variable (perception)	Operationalization
Political trust	Numerical (scale): 0 (*no trust at all*)–10 (*full trust*)
Block IV: Variables related to the perception of the potential contribution of the European Commission's social media communication to the increase of political trust in the institution (GO2)	
Variables (perceptions)	Operationalization
Information provision	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Input seeking	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Online dialogue	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Offline interaction	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Symbolic presentation	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)

3.2. Data Analysis Techniques and Tools

All variables in the questionnaire are either numerical or can be numerically coded. Consequently, the technique used for data analysis was statistical analysis. The implementation of this technique involves a series of statistical tools: descriptive statistics, binary logistic regression (BLR) models, analyses of B regression coefficients, ordinal regressions, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and Dunn's post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction. Data analysis procedures were carried out using standard spreadsheet applications, statistical package for the social sciences, and R.

3.2.1. Variables Analyzed

The variables analyzed were self-evident and explicitly derived from individual responses to each questionnaire question. Regarding the coding of variables for analysis procedures, coding equivalent to that

used during operationalization was generally applied. However, in certain statistical procedures, modifications were made. These transformations are specified in the following section and in the corresponding parts of the results.

3.2.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis procedure is divided into two sections: the first corresponding to GO1 and the second to GO2.

The first section begins with a general descriptive overview of the respondents' political trust values in the institution. Subsequently, to initiate the analysis of the influence of the determinants, two BLR models were conducted: one for micro-determinants and another for macro-determinants.

In both models, the dependent variable is political trust in the European Commission, coded as binary by assigning zero to values below five and one to values equal to or above five. The threshold is set at five based on the median of the responses, following a median-based determination process. Also, in practical terms, the value of five on the 0/10 scale typically represents a neutral or minimal threshold of trust, distinguishing respondents who express some degree of trust in the institution from those who do not. This aligns with prior survey research conventions, where values above this point are interpreted as indicating positive trust. Thus, the threshold is justified both by the statistical distribution of responses and by substantively relevant divisions in social perceptions regarding institutional trust, which further enhances its applied relevance. In the micro-determinants model, the independent variables are the sociodemographic variables from Block I, while the macro-determinants model uses the five variables from Block II. To ensure multicollinearity between variables is not an issue, the variance inflation factor was calculated for numerical variables and the generalized variance inflation factor for categorical variables.

These two models offer an initial examination of the determinants' influence, identifying which variables hold explanatory potential concerning political trust in the institution. However, further tests are required to evaluate the direction and strength of these influences.

Firstly, the B regression coefficients are analyzed independently in both models. They indicate the direction and magnitude of each relevant explanatory variable's effect on the binary dependent variable. The interpretation of these coefficients was performed in the final step of each model, in relation to the reference categories/values for each relevant variable. The reference categories/values are always the last in the operationalization. For example, for the variable country of residence, the reference category is Poland.

In a complementary manner, two ordinal regressions were conducted with political trust (coded on the 0/10 scale) as the dependent variable and the relevant variables identified in each BLR model as independent variables. This enables the assessment of the relationship between variables, overcoming the limitations of simplifying the dependent variable into a binary form. The analysis takes into account the estimates and *p*-values from both regressions.

The second section begins with an overall descriptive summary of the perceived potential of each category of communication on the Commission's social media to increase its political trust. Then, in order to independently

analyze the responses of young citizens who do not trust the institution (value <5) and those who do (value ≥5), the responses to the variables in Block IV are grouped separately. Considering the absence of normality in the distributions, a Kruskal-Wallis test is performed on each set of responses. This approach enables the identification of statistically significant differences in the perceived potential of the different social media communications through intra- and inter-group examinations.

To determine which categories of communication show differences and whether these differences reflect a more favorable or unfavorable perception of potential compared to others, a post hoc test was conducted. The Dunn test with Bonferroni correction was applied. To facilitate the presentation of the results, each communication category was assigned an ID (x1, x2, x3, x4, and x5).

4. Results

In accordance with the data analysis procedure, the presentation of the results is divided into two parts, each corresponding to a distinct general objective.

4.1. GO1

The average value of political trust in the European Commission among respondents is 5.506 on the 0/10 scale (median = 5). A total of 312 respondents (66.383%) assign a trust value of 5 or higher, with the most frequent responses being 5 (n = 77; 16.383%) and 7 (n = 64; 13.617%).

4.1.1. Micro-Determinants of Youth Political Trust in the European Commission

The first step in analyzing the micro-determinants is a BLR model. The dependent variable is political trust, binary coded (distrust/trust), and the independent variables are the six sociodemographic variables (Block I).

After running the model, three variables are identified as relevant: socioeconomic status, employment status, and education. Neither country of residency, gender, nor age is found to be relevant. The omnibus test of model coefficients shows a $p < 0.050$ for the three relevant variables, thus validating their inclusion. Three additional model fit tests are performed: Cox and Snell's R-squared, Nagelkerke's R-squared, and the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test. In all three cases, the obtained values confirm the validity of the model. The variance inflation factor and generalized variance inflation factor statistics are clearly below the commonly accepted threshold, so multicollinearity between variables is not an issue. The classification table shows a correct prediction in 74.255% of cases (see Table 3).

To determine the direction and intensity of the effect of the three relevant variables, the B regression coefficients are analyzed. Regarding socioeconomic status, the results are: B (lower) = −21.551, B (lower-middle) = −20.305, B (middle) = −19.877, and B (middle-upper) = −19.723. For employment status: B (unemployed) = −1.451, B (student) = −0.905, and B (employed) = −0.512. For education: B (primary) = −1.106 and B (secondary) = −0.318.

Table 3. Classification table of the BLR model (micro-determinants).

Step	Variables (independent)	Observed		Predicted		
				distrust/trust (dependent)		% Correct
				0 (distrust)	1 (trust)	
Step 1	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	23	135	14.557
			1 (trust)	8	304	97.436
		General percentage				69.574
Step 2	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	48	110	30.380
	Employment status		1 (trust)	15	297	95.192
		General percentage				73.404
Step 3	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	59	99	37.342
	Employment status		1 (trust)	22	290	92.949
	Education	General percentage				74.255

To further explore the relationship between variables, an ordinal regression was conducted, where the dependent variable, political trust in the European Commission, maintains its original coding (0/10 scale). In this case, the obtained estimates are more representative. For the variable socioeconomic status, the results are: est (lower) = −2.504 ($p < 0.001$), est (lower-middle) = −1.832 ($p < 0.001$), est (middle) = −1.271 ($p = 0.011$), and est (middle-upper) = −0.921 ($p = 0.072$). For employment status: est (unemployed) = −0.984 ($p = 0.003$), est (student) = −0.366 ($p = 0.217$), and est (employed) = −0.198 ($p = 0.521$). For education: est (primary) = −1.339 ($p < 0.001$) and est (secondary) = −0.284 ($p = 0.166$).

Therefore, considering both analyses, in which all values (*B*/est) are below zero, it is determined that the reference categories exhibit the highest levels of political trust. Additionally, analyzing the progression, it is found that higher socioeconomic status and education are associated with a greater probability of trusting the institution. For employment status, the categories involving labor activity present the highest values. The relationship is positive across all three variables. This can be visualized graphically in Figure 1.

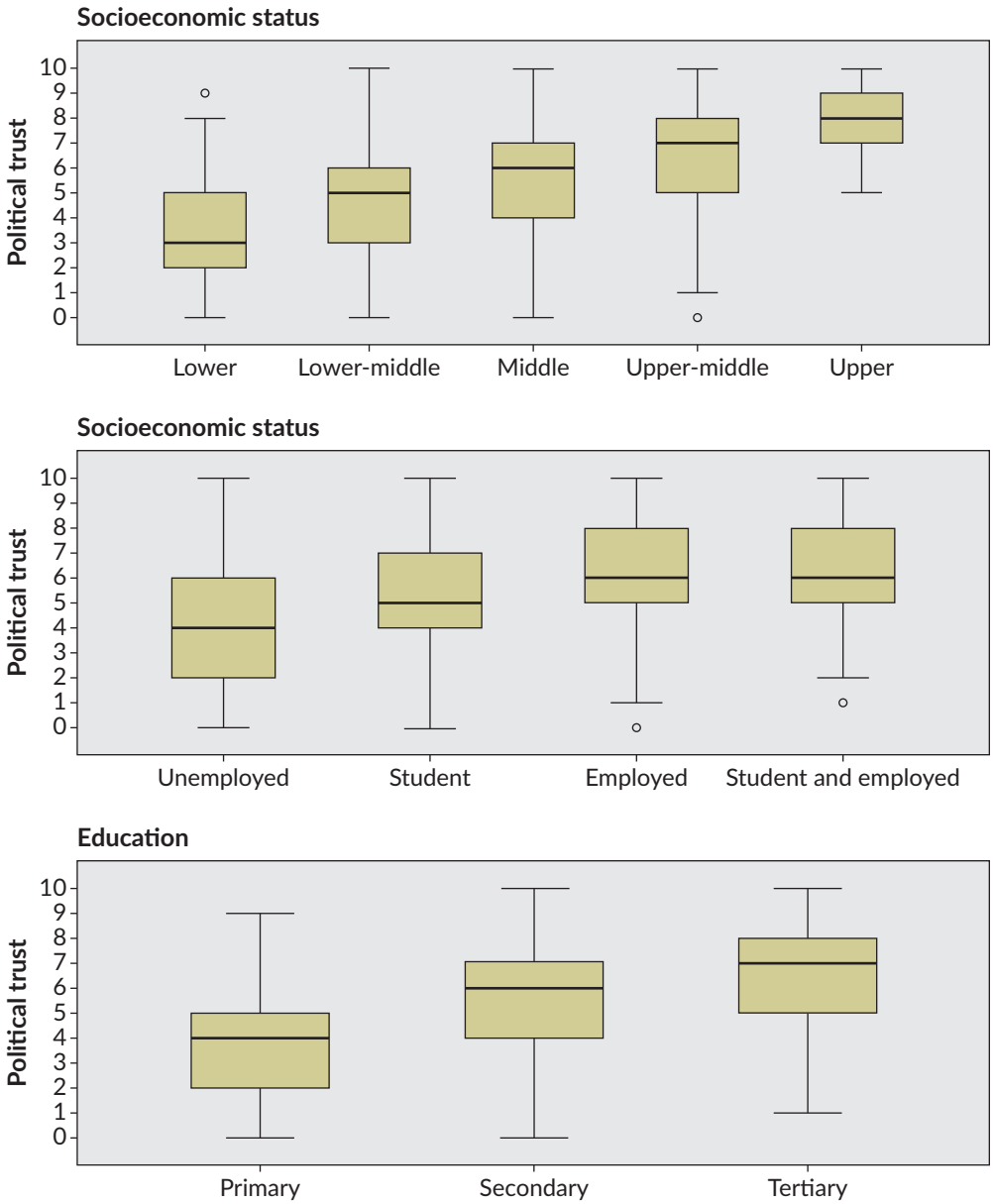

Figure 1. Box-plots on the relevant micro-determinants.

4.1.2. Macro-Determinants of Youth Political Trust in the European Commission

In this case, the independent variables in the BLR model are the five corresponding to perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes of the European Commission (Block II).

Only two variables are considered relevant: the perception of the possibility of citizen participation and the perception of economic performance (omnibus tests $p < 0.001$). The perceptions of institutional efficiency, transparency, and the absence of corruption are not relevant. The three reliability tests conducted confirm the validity of the model. Multicollinearity does not pose a problem in this model either. The general percentage of correct predictions in the final step of the classification table is 83.617% (see Table 4).

Table 4. Classification table of the BLR model (macro-determinants).

Step	Variables (independent)	Observed		Predicted		
				distrust/trust (dependent)		% Correct
				0 (distrust)	1 (trust)	
S1	Possibility of citizen participation (perception)	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	87	71	55.063
			1 (trust)	17	295	94.551
		General percentage				81.277
S2	Possibility of citizen participation Economic performance (perceptions)	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	111	47	70.253
			1 (trust)	30	282	90.385
		General percentage				83.617

The *B* regression coefficients reflect a positive relationship between the binary dependent variable (distrust/trust) and both explanatory and relevant independent variables. The relationship, for both variables, is almost uninterrupted across all 10 values in relation to the reference value. In the final step, for the variable concerning the perception of the possibility of citizen participation, the coefficients range from $B\ (0) = -20.773$ to $B\ (9) = -0.040$. For the variable related to the perception of economic performance, the range is from $B\ (0) = -39.248$ to $B\ (9) = -18.033$.

The ordinal regression indeed shows an uninterrupted progression across the 10 values. Regarding the first variable, the estimates are: est (0) = −6.450 ($p < 0.001$), est (1) = −4.788 ($p < 0.001$), est (2) = −5.573 ($p < 0.001$),...est (7) = −1.439 ($p = 0.002$), est (8) = −0.620 ($p = 0.187$), and est (9) = −0.543 ($p = 0.288$). Concerning the second variable: est (0) = −4.271 ($p < 0.001$), est (1) = −3.963 ($p < 0.001$), est (2) = −3.875 ($p < 0.001$),...est (7) = −1.176 ($p = 0.030$), est (8) = −1.099 ($p = 0.051$), and est (9) = −0.538 ($p = 0.317$). Consequently, the positive relationships are confirmed. This can be visualized graphically in Figure 2.

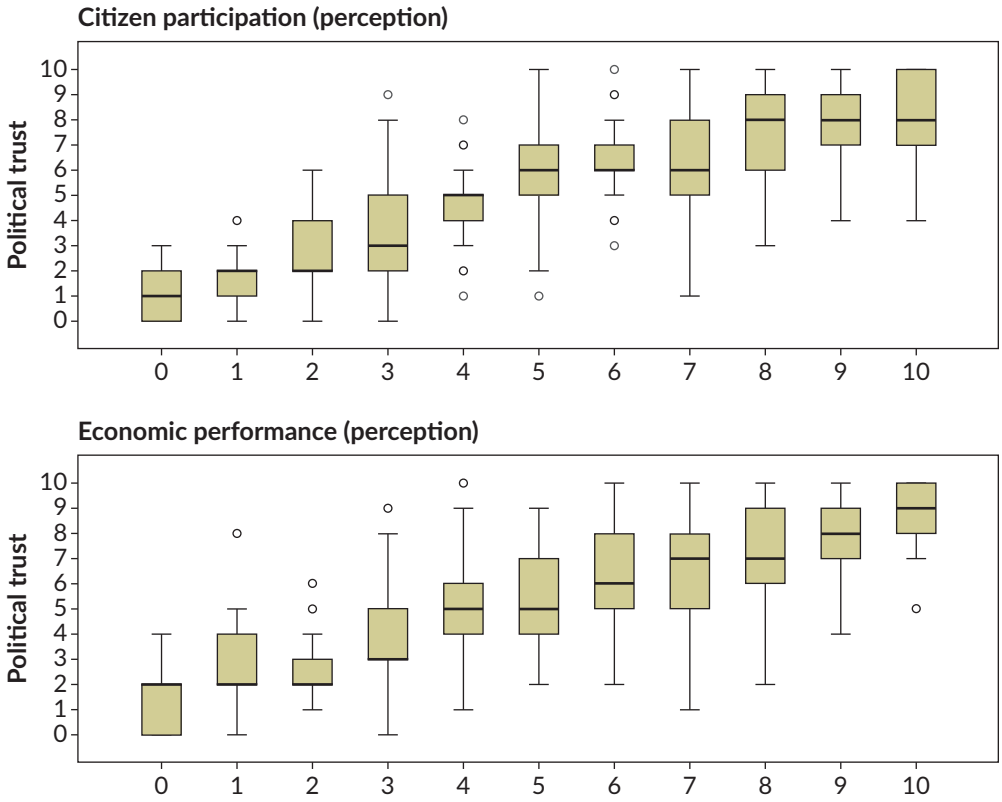

Figure 2. Box-plots on the relevant macro-determinants.

4.2. GO2

The overall distribution of values on the perceived potential of the five categories of social media communication by the European Commission to increase political trust in the institution is summarized in Table 5. The category with the highest general perceived potential is input seeking (average = 6.636; median = 7), while the one with the lowest is symbolic presentation (average = 2.706; median = 2).

Table 5. Summary of the perceived potential to increase political trust in the European Commission for each category of social media communication by the institution.

Category	Information provision	Input seeking	Online dialogue	Offline interaction	Symbolic presentation
	ID: x1	ID: x2	ID: x3	ID: x4	ID: x5
Average (scale 0/10)	4.212	6.636	5.674	5.751	2.706
Median (scale 0/10)	4	7	6	6	2
Normality (*p*-value)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Skewness	0.399	−0.579	−0.109	−0.056	1.138
Excess kurtosis	−0.729	−0.165	−0.094	0.034	1.214

Two lines of analysis are established, separating the responses of young citizens who do not trust the institution (n = 158; 33.617%) from those who do (n = 312; 66.383%). In both cases, the distributions of the responses are not normal ($p < 0.050$). Taking into account this lack of normality, two Kruskal-Wallis tests are conducted

to assess differences in perceived potential across communication categories, one for each response group. In both tests, the null hypothesis of equal distributions across categories is rejected ($p < 0.001$). The H statistics ($H = 232.702$ and $H = 407.111$, respectively) are well above the critical acceptance value (9.487), further reinforcing the rejection of the null hypothesis. Therefore, there are statistically significant differences in the perceived potential of the various categories of social media communication. The effect sizes are $\eta^2 = 0.294$ and $\eta^2 = 0.261$, indicating that the differences are substantial.

In order to determine the sources of statistically significant differences between categories, two post-hoc Dunn tests with Bonferroni correction were carried out, one for each Kruskal-Wallis test. The corrected α value is 0.005 ($alpha/m = 0.050/10$).

For young Europeans who do not trust the Commission, the following pairs of social media communication categories show statistically significant differences in perceived potential to increase political trust in the institution: x1–x2, x1–x3, x1–x4, x1–x5, x2–x5, x3–x5, and x4–x5. For those who do trust the institution, the significantly different pairs are: x1–x2, x1–x3, x1–x4, x1–x5, x2–x3, x2–x4, x2–x5, x3–x5, and x4–x5. Table 6 presents the statistics for all possible pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Table 6. Mean (rank) differences in all pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Pair	Mean (rank) difference	*Z*	*SE*	Critical value	*p*-value
Responses from young citizens who do not trust the European Commission					
x1–x2	−237.686	9.305	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x3	−192.177	7.524	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x4	−196.155	7.679	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x5	72.553	2.840	25.541	71.695	0.004
x2–x3	45.509	1.781	25.541	71.695	0.074
x2–x4	41.531	1.626	25.541	71.695	0.103
x2–x5	310.240	12.146	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x3–x4	−3.977	0.155	25.541	71.695	0.876
x3–x5	264.731	10.364	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x4–x5	268.708	10.520	25.541	71.695	<0.001

Table 6. (Cont.) Mean (rank) differences in all pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Pair	Mean (rank) difference	*Z*	*SE*	Critical value	*p*-value
Responses from young citizens who trust the European Commission					
x1–x2	−376.227	10.494	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x3	−184.125	5.135	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x4	−196.786	5.488	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x5	299.054	8.341	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x3	192.102	5.358	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x4	179.440	5.005	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x5	675.282	18.835	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x3–x4	−12.661	0.353	35.851	100.637	0.724
x3–x5	483.179	13.477	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x4–x5	495.841	13.830	35.851	100.637	<0.001

As derived from the analyses of differences, perceptions of the potential of social media communication categories to increase political trust in the European Commission do not vary significantly depending on whether young citizens trust the supranational institution or not. Clearly, the communication category with the highest perceived potential is input seeking, followed by offline interaction and online dialogue. Communication oriented towards symbolic presentation show the lowest values.

5. Discussion

On the political trust of young Europeans in the European Commission, this research reflects a scenario where, although a considerable number of respondents trust the institution, the majority show some skepticism, and a significant proportion exhibit strongly negative and polarized levels of political trust. From this perspective, the results are partially in line with those of Stals et al. (2024) and Kołczyńska (2021). The most likely causes are the disconnect between European youth and politics, as well as ideological polarization, both of which have been widely studied in the scientific literature (e.g., Harring, 2024; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

The micro-determinants identified as relevant are socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, all showing a positive relationship with political trust in the institution. Overall, the results align with existing research, which also links better socioeconomic conditions (Drakos et al., 2019; Schoon & Cheng, 2011), favorable employment status (Drakos et al., 2019; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Schoon & Cheng, 2011), and higher education levels (Hooghe et al., 2012; Kołczyńska, 2020) with higher levels of political trust in European institutions. This is logical, as individuals with financial stability, secure employment, and higher education are more likely to engage with political processes. In contrast, those facing economic or job insecurity tend to view these institutions as less effective in addressing their needs, leading to higher levels of distrust (Wroe, 2016).

Despite these alignments, in terms of regional differences, the results diverge from certain studies (Motti-Stefanidi & Cicognani, 2018; Stals et al., 2024) that report higher political trust in central and

northern European regions. No statistically significant regional differences are found across the five countries analyzed. This finding may reflect the greater integration of EU institutions and shared political experiences, particularly among younger Europeans. Factors like the collective responses to major crises and the influence of digital platforms could have led to a more unified perception of political trust, reducing regional variations, partially in line with Serna-Ortega et al. (2025). Similarly, no differences are observed based on gender or age.

On the other hand, among the macro-determinants associated with the quality of democratic processes, a positive link is found with perceptions of the possibility of citizen participation. This relationship is supported by existing research. For instance, Ardanaz et al. (2023) find that greater citizen participation correlates with higher political trust, emphasizing the importance of raising awareness about participation initiatives. Hooghe and Marien (2013), in that line, associate political trust with institutionalized participation. At the local level, Holum (2023) finds no such connection, suggesting that the relationship may vary depending on the institutional geographical context. Within this first group of macro-determinants, neither perceived transparency nor the perceived absence of corruption, both frequently linked to political trust (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Torcal & Christmann, 2021), emerge as significant factors. This may once again be attributed to young citizens' passive disengagement from politics, a phenomenon that remains a topic of ongoing debate (Dahl et al., 2020). Their limited engagement often stems from a perception that political issues are abstract or lack personal relevance, causing immediate or personal political experiences to carry more weight than broader institutional perceptions in shaping their trust.

With respect to macro-determinants related to institutional performance, the perception of the European Commission's economic performance is also positively linked to its political trust among European youth. This is consistent with several studies (e.g., Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011) that examine the issue through subjective perceptions. These findings reinforce the existing consensus when evaluating the topic via perceptions, which does not hold when explored from an objective perspective using macroeconomic indicators (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Taylor, 2000; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Concerning the categories of social media communication that young Europeans perceive as having the greatest potential to increase political trust in the Commission, the results reveal notable differences between bidirectional and unidirectional communication. Communication oriented toward input seeking, online dialogue, and offline interaction received the highest ratings. These findings align with previous research that highlights the importance of bidirectional interaction in fostering institutional trust (Dong & Ji, 2018; Weinberg, 2024). Young citizens perceive that these categories facilitate active participation, mitigating their political disengagement by making them feel heard and integrated into political-building processes (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Murni et al., 2024). This kind of dialogue signals that institutions listen to citizens, which is crucial for building legitimacy (Campos Domínguez, 2024; Mergel, 2013).

Conversely, unidirectional communication, such as information provision and symbolic presentation, is perceived as less effective. Their static and hierarchical nature does not meet young Europeans' expectations for direct interaction with institutions. Symbolic presentation can be interpreted as superficial self-promotion, especially if it is perceived as disconnected from concrete actions (DePaula et al., 2018;

Fairbanks et al., 2007). This reinforces the idea that young Europeans reject traditional approaches to political communication, associating them with inauthentic or distant practices (Garnett, 1997; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

A relevant finding is that these perceptions do not vary significantly between those who distrust and those who trust the institution. Both groups agree on prioritizing interactive strategies, suggesting that the demand for participation transcends prior levels of trust, further reinforcing the notion that bidirectionality is not only useful for regaining lost trust but also for strengthening it (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Porumbescu, 2016). In this way, the results highlight a paradigm shift in young citizens' expectations: They are no longer passive recipients of information, but active agents demanding shared responsibility in governance (Bovaird, 2007; Weinberg, 2024).

To correctly interpret the findings of the study, it is important to consider its limitations. In data collection, the main limitation is the cross-sectional design, which may cause responses to be influenced by temporal bias or by social and political events occurring at the time of the questionnaire. Moreover, the use of a first-party data platform in the recruitment process may also introduce biases related to online literacy, as participants must have a minimum level of digital competence to register and complete the questionnaire, and biases related to digital access, which may limit participation to individuals with stable internet connections and adequate devices, potentially excluding certain demographic groups. At the same time, for certain sensitive variables, there may be a bias due to respondents' reluctance to accurately disclose their true situation. In the data analysis, the main limitation is the subjectivity of the responses, present in all studies that include perceptual variables. Also, although complementary statistical procedures have been employed to maximize the representativeness of the results, the use of scales or the conversion of variables may present a reductionist view of the phenomenon at certain points of the analysis. Lastly, extrapolating the findings requires caution, as the study focuses solely on young citizens from the EU's five most populous countries and one specific institution.

6. Conclusions

For GO1, it is concluded that the political trust of European youth in the Commission is not optimal. The majority of respondents rate their level of trust at intermediate values, indicating doubts or skepticism about the institution. The micro-determinants with predictive potential are socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, all showing a positive relation. The relevant macro-determinants include the perception of the possibility of citizen participation and the perception of the institution's economic performance, also showing a positive relationship with political trust. Therefore, H1 is partially supported and partially rejected. Statistically significant differences are found in three of the four sociodemographic variables, with country of residence being the only one that does not follow the expected trend. Regarding the two hypothesized macro-determinants, both are found to be related to political trust, although this relationship is confirmed only through two of the five variables included.

For GO2, it is concluded that the category of communication via the European Commission's social media with the highest perceived potential to increase political trust in the institution is input seeking, followed by offline interaction and online dialogue. Consequently, H2 is supported by the findings.

Beyond their contribution to the scientific literature and social debates on the importance of political trust in contemporary democracies, these findings have great potential for application in developing communication strategies aimed at increasing political trust between the European youth and the European Commission. For example, social media campaigns could focus on promoting transparency and engaging in bidirectional communication through live Q&A sessions or interactive polls. However, scaling such initiatives across diverse national contexts may present challenges, including varying levels of digital literacy and cultural differences. These potential barriers must be addressed to ensure the effectiveness and inclusivity of these strategies.

Building on the discussed limitations, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how perceptions evolve over time, addressing temporal bias and the influence of transient social or political events. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods would help mitigate the limitations inherent in self-reported data. Expanding the study to include a broader range of geographical contexts and institutions could also provide valuable insights into how these perceptions vary across different political landscapes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated as a result of the research can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GRMSWZ and will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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