

Relational Trust and the Legitimacy of Digital Content Regulation

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Abstract

Digital content regulation has become a central policy challenge in platform-mediated information environments, where efforts to mitigate misinformation and online harm often collide with concerns about freedom of expression. Existing scholarship commonly explains public support for regulation through individual-level attributes such as ideology, digital literacy, and media use. This study advances a relational trust framework, arguing that regulatory legitimacy is socially constructed through trust embedded in interpersonal, institutional, and platform-based relationships. Drawing on a quota-based survey of 270 respondents in urban and rural Mongolia, the study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and multigroup analysis to examine direct, mediating, and moderating effects across four trust dimensions: strong-tie trust, weak-tie trust, institutional trust, and platform trust. The findings show that institutional trust is the strongest predictor of acceptance of digital content regulation, while strong-tie, weak-tie, and platform trust also exert significant positive effects. Relational trust fully mediates the relationship between freedom of expression concerns and regulatory acceptance, indicating that trust is a central mechanism through which democratic values are interpreted and negotiated. Urban–rural and generational differences further reveal that trust operates in context-specific ways. By foregrounding relational trust, the study explains regulatory legitimacy as a socially embedded outcome, especially in small states operating under asymmetric platform power.

Keywords: digital content regulation, platform governance, relational trust, freedom of expression, Mongolia

1. Introduction

Digital platforms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have become deeply embedded in every stage of the production, distribution, and consumption of journalistic content, fundamentally reshaping contemporary information ecosystems. The rapid expansion of social media and platform-mediated communication has transformed citizens' access, evaluation, and engagement with information worldwide. While these platforms have expanded the opportunities for expression and participation, they have simultaneously intensified concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and coordinated information manipulation. Recent developments in AI-generated content, including synthetic media and deep fakes, have further exposed the limitations of traditional explanations that attribute misinformation primarily to individual intent or cognitive vulnerability. A growing body of research has demonstrated that the algorithmic curation, ranking, and dissemination logics embedded in digital platforms play a decisive role in amplifying misleading and harmful content. Beyond individual-level harm, scholars have warned that such dynamics erode the conditions for rational public deliberation, thereby weakening the core foundation of democratic governance.

Governments worldwide have engaged in intense debates over online content regulation, grappling with how to balance freedom of expression against concerns for public safety, social cohesion, and national security. The international regulatory discourse has gradually shifted from viewing digital platforms as neutral intermediaries to recognizing them as powerful actors that actively shape the public information environment and, under certain conditions, should bear regulatory responsibility. In Mongolia, digital content regulation has largely emerged through legal and administrative measures to safeguard electoral integrity and mitigate misinformation during public crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these regulatory efforts have been widely criticized for their lack of independent and transparent mechanisms for expert content assessment. Scholars caution that in the absence of such safeguards, measures ostensibly targeting misinformation or hate speech may enable disproportionate restrictions on citizens' rights to access information and express opinions (Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, 2020).

The controversy surrounding the 2023 draft Law on the “Protection of Human Rights on Social Media” further illustrates

this tension. Although the proposed legislation sought to address defamation, harassment, personal data violations, and false information, it was vetoed by the President of Mongolia on the grounds that it risked excessive infringement on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. This episode highlights a broader dilemma confronting digital governance in Mongolia: regulatory initiatives repeatedly encounter resistance not only on legal grounds but also due to contested perceptions of legitimacy.

Existing research in Mongolia has primarily explained the public acceptance of digital content regulation through individual-level factors such as digital literacy, ideological orientation, and information consumption habits. While valuable, this approach implicitly assumes that individuals as autonomous evaluators of regulation, insufficiently account for the relational contexts through which information credibility is negotiated and political judgments are formed. This limitation is particularly salient in small states operating under asymmetric power relations with global platforms, where the platform infrastructure, moderation rules, and algorithmic systems often exercise *de facto* governance that precedes or exceeds the national regulatory capacity. In the Mongolian context, which is characterized by a small-scale, post-socialist social structure, information acceptance is commonly mediated through dense networks of family ties, close social circles, online communities, trusted influencers, and culturally embedded platform use practices. These relational environments shape not only how information is interpreted but also whether regulatory interventions are perceived as legitimate, protective, or coercive.

Mongolia provides a particularly suitable case for examining the legitimacy of digital content regulation for several reasons. First, as a small democratic state with a highly platform-dependent information environment, Mongolia illustrates the regulatory challenges faced by countries whose public sphere is strongly shaped by global digital platforms but whose national regulatory capacity remains comparatively limited. Second, Mongolia has experienced repeated tensions between efforts to regulate online misinformation, hate speech, and harmful content and concerns about freedom of expression and press freedom. The public controversy surrounding the 2023 draft Law on the Protection of Human Rights on Social Media demonstrates that digital regulation in Mongolia is not merely a technical or legal issue, but a question of public trust and democratic legitimacy. Third, Mongolia's social structure, characterized by dense interpersonal networks, strong family and community ties, and growing reliance on online communities and influencers, makes it especially appropriate for analyzing how relational trust shapes citizens' acceptance of regulatory intervention. For these reasons, Mongolia offers a compelling empirical context in which to examine how trust, platform power, and democratic values interact in the governance of digital content.

This study argues that understanding the public acceptance of digital content regulation requires a shift from an individual-centered paradigm toward a relational trust framework. Rather than reflecting isolated attitudes toward freedom of expression or security, regulatory acceptance emerges from multilayered trust relationships embedded in social, institutional, and platform-based contexts. Specifically, this study conceptualizes relational trust across four interconnected dimensions: (1) strong-tie trust rooted in family and close social networks, (2) weak-tie trust associated with online communities and influencers, (3) institutional trust in government and regulatory authorities, and (4) platform trust in social media and digital intermediaries. This study makes three contributions by empirically examining how these trust dimensions mediate and condition the relationship between concerns about freedom of expression and regulatory acceptance. First, it extends debates on digital governance by demonstrating that legitimacy is not solely a legal or normative construct but a relational outcome shaped by trust networks. Second, it contributes to the platform governance scholarship by foregrounding the experience of small states operating under *de facto* platform power. Third, it offers an empirically grounded and culturally contextualized account of regulatory acceptance in a non-Western, post-socialist setting.

Methodologically, this study employs a quota-based survey of 270 respondents from urban and rural Mongolia and applies Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, including mediation and multigroup analysis. Through the Mongolian case, this article underscores the necessity of relationally grounded approaches to digital regulation in the platformized public sphere.

2. Digital Regulation in Mongolia

Research on the digital environment, information consumption, and online risks in Mongolia has predominantly focused on individual-level factors. Studies have typically emphasized digital literacy, information-processing skills, online behavioral patterns, and risk awareness as primary determinants of citizens' exposure to and engagement with online information. For example, assessments and methodological discussions conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on digital literacy in Mongolia conceptualize participation in the digital environment largely in terms of individual knowledge, skills, and competencies and employ these indicators as key inputs for policy development (UNDP 2021, 2022). Similarly, recent studies on cyberbullying and online risks among children and adolescents in Mongolia have prioritized individual-level dimensions such as user vulnerability, exposure to harmful content, and

protective capacities within online environments (UNDP 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into harm prevention and digital safety policies, they remain limited in their ability to explain the broader social processes through which information comes to be recognized as “true,” or through which regulatory interventions are perceived as legitimate and acceptable.

In contrast, international scholarship on platform governance and digital content regulation has increasingly moved beyond individual-centered explanations toward institutional, infrastructural, and relational perspectives. Gillespie (2018) conceptualizes social media platforms as active custodians rather than neutral intermediaries, that shape the visibility, legitimacy, and circulation of content through moderation practices and algorithmic decision-making. DeNardis (2014) further demonstrates that internet governance constitutes a transnational arena of power struggles that extends beyond the regulatory authority of individual nation-states. Building on this shift, Helberger et al. (2018) argue that the governance of online platforms should be understood not only as a matter of state enforcement but also as a model of shared and cooperative responsibility involving multiple actors and trust-based regulatory arrangements. Similarly, Van Dijck et al. (2018) show how public values in platformized societies are reconfigured through platform architectures and algorithmic systems, providing a theoretical foundation for analyzing regulatory legitimacy as a socially embedded and relational process. Within the Mongolian context, the acceptance of information as “true” or the recognition of digital content regulation as legitimate cannot be reduced to individual knowledge or cognitive capacity alone. Rather, these processes are mediated by trust and relational networks. Recent analyses by the Independent Research Institute of Mongolia on misinformation and online polarization highlight that declining interpersonal trust and weakened institutional trust increase the public’s vulnerability to informational influence and manipulation (IRIM 2021, 2022). These findings resonate with the international governance scholarship by demonstrating that trust operates as a central mechanism that shapes how information and regulations are socially interpreted.

Simultaneously, nationally administered survey series, such as the Politbarometer have systematically measured public trust in the government, political institutions, and public authorities over time (Sant Maral Foundation 2022). These data offer important insights into how citizens’ acceptance of policies and regulatory interventions may be linked to their levels of institutional trust. However, these surveys rarely explicitly examine digital content regulation, nor do they integrate platform-level or network-based trust dynamics into analytical frameworks.

Taken together, the existing research in Mongolia reveals a clear imbalance. On the one hand, individual-level dimensions such as digital literacy, information consumption habits, and online behavior, have been relatively well measured and documented (UNDP). On the other hand, empirical research that systematically examines how citizens perceive digital content regulation as legitimate by situating this process within multilevel relational structures involving family and close social networks, online communities, influencers, institutional trust, and platform trust remains scarce.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The primary objective of this study is to explain how citizens in Mongolia perceive, support, or oppose digital content regulation through the lens of multilevel relational trust structures. Specifically, this study examines how acceptance of digital regulation as *legitimate* is shaped not only by abstract individual attitudes but also by trust embedded in relationships with family networks, social connections, institutions, and digital platforms, particularly in the context of a small state operating under asymmetric power relations with global platforms. More precisely, this study aims to identify how trust in different relational domains mediates and conditions public acceptance of digital content regulation, moving beyond individual-centered explanations that emphasize ideology, digital literacy, or information consumption habits alone. By doing so, this study addresses how legitimacy is socially constructed through relational environments rather than derived solely from legal authority or personal belief systems. In addition, it seeks to explain how relational trust mediates the tension between concerns over freedom of expression and support for regulatory interventions. Rather than treating freedom of expression and harm prevention as a binary tradeoff, this study investigates how trust operates as an intervening mechanism that shapes whether regulatory measures are perceived as protective and acceptable or as coercive and illegitimate. Finally, this study aims to explore how acceptance of digital content regulation varies across different social contexts within Mongolia, particularly along urban–rural and generational lines. By examining these contextual differences, this study seeks to demonstrate how relational trust structures interact with spatial and generational factors to produce heterogeneous regulatory acceptance patterns.

Through these objectives, this study contributes to broader theoretical debates on digital governance and regulatory legitimacy by offering an empirically grounded and relationally informed account of how public support for digital regulation is formed in non-Western, post-socialist, and small-state contexts.

3.1 Research Hypotheses

3.1.1 H1. Core Relationship

Public acceptance of digital content regulation in Mongolia is negatively associated with concerns about freedom of expression. As concerns regarding potential infringements on freedom of expression increase, support for digital content regulation decreases.

3.1.2 H2. Limits of Individual-Level Explanations

Individual-level factors, including ideological orientation, digital literacy, and information consumption habits, partially explain the acceptance of digital content regulation. However, when relational trust variables are incorporated into the model, the explanatory power of these individual-level factors is substantially reduced.

3.1.3 H3. Strong-Tie Trust

Higher levels of strong-tie trust rooted in family and close social networks are positively associated with greater acceptance of digital content regulation.

3.1.4 H4. Weak-Tie and Platform Trust

Both weak-tie trust based on online communities and influencers and platform trust in social media platforms exert positive effects on the acceptance of digital content regulation.

3.1.5 H5. Dominant Role of Institutional Trust

Institutional trust in government and regulatory authorities has the strongest positive effect on the acceptance of digital content regulation relative to other forms of relational trust.

3.1.6 H6. Mediation: Trust as the Core Mechanism

Relational trust mediates the relationship between concerns about freedom of expression and the acceptance of digital content regulation. Specifically, when trust levels are high, the negative effect of concerns about freedom of expression on regulatory acceptance is attenuated.

3.1.7 H7. Urban–Rural Moderation

Urban–rural differences moderate the relationship between relational trust and acceptance of digital content regulation. Strong-tie trust exerts a stronger effect on rural areas, whereas weak-tie and platform trust exert stronger effects on urban residents.

3.1.8 H8. Generational Moderation

Age and generational differences moderate the relationship between institutional trust and acceptance of digital content regulation. Institutional trust has a stronger effect among older cohorts, whereas platform trust plays a more prominent role among younger cohorts.

4. Research Design and Methods

This study adopted a quantitative, explanatory research design to examine how public acceptance of digital content regulation in Mongolia is shaped by multilevel relational trust structures. Moving beyond individual-centered explanations, this study focuses on how trust embedded in social, institutional, and platform-based relationships mediates and conditions attitudes toward digital regulation. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect empirical data from Mongolian citizens. The proposed theoretical model, incorporating mediation and moderation mechanisms, was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This approach allows for the simultaneous estimation of complex relationships among latent constructs, while emphasizing predictive explanatory power. PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, it develops and tests a relatively novel relational trust framework in the context of digital regulation, which remains undertheorized, particularly in small-state and non-Western settings. Second, the model involves multiple latent constructs as well as mediation and moderation effects, thereby increasing structural complexity. Third, the method is well-suited to moderate sample sizes and does not impose strict assumptions regarding data normality. Unlike covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM prioritizes variance explanation and prediction rather than strict theory confirmation, making it suitable for exploratory and theory-building research. Accordingly, this study followed established methodological guidelines for PLS-SEM applications in the social sciences.

4.1 Data Collection and Measurement

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to Mongolian residents. A quota-based sampling strategy was used to ensure representation across both urban and rural areas. The final dataset consisted of 270 valid responses. The sample was characterized by a relatively young age distribution, with approximately 78 percent of the respondents aged between 18 and 30 years. In terms of geographic distribution, 77.3 percent of the respondents resided

in Ulaanbaatar, while the remainder were drawn from rural provinces, including Arkhangai, Bulgan, Övörkhongai, and Selenge. Although the sample is not fully representative nationally, it reflects the demographic groups most actively engaged in digital platforms and online information environments, which are central to the research focus.

All the latent constructs were measured using a multi-item Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement items were adapted from scales established in the existing literature and contextualized to reflect Mongolian digital and institutional environments. The study includes the following key constructs:

- Regulation Acceptance (dependent variable): respondents' support for and the perceived legitimacy of digital content regulation.
- Freedom of Expression Concern: concerns about potential infringements on freedom of expression resulting from regulatory intervention
- Individual-level factors: ideological orientation, digital literacy, and information consumption habits
- Relational trust dimensions:
 - strong-tie trust (family and close social networks),
 - weak-tie trust (online communities and influencers),
 - institutional trust (government and regulatory authorities),
 - platform trust (social media platforms and digital intermediaries).

All constructs were specified as reflective measurement models.

4.2 Analytical Strategy

Data analysis was performed in four stages using PLS-SEM. First, the measurement model was assessed by examining the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted [AVE]), and discriminant validity (Heterotrait–Monotrait [HTMT] ratio). Second, the structural model was evaluated by analyzing the path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). Multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factors (VIF). Third, a mediation analysis was conducted to test the indirect effects of relational trust between freedom of expression concerns and regulation acceptance. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to estimate confidence intervals and assess statistical significance. Fourth, the moderation effects related to residential location (urban vs. rural) and generational differences were examined using a PLS-based multigroup analysis (PLS-MGA). This approach enables a systematic comparison of structural paths across subgroups. Bootstrapping procedures were applied throughout the analysis to ensure a robust estimation of standard errors and confidence intervals for the direct, indirect, and moderated effects.

4.2.1 Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to assess the reliability and validity of all the latent constructs prior to testing the structural relationships. Internal consistency, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were systematically examined in accordance with the established PLS-SEM guidelines.

4.2.2 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was evaluated by examining standardized factor loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All indicator loadings were statistically significant and exceeded the recommended minimum value of 0.70. In addition, all the AVE values were above the threshold of 0.50, demonstrating that each latent construct explains a sufficient proportion of the variance in the indicators.

4.2.3 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, confirming that the latent constructs were empirically distinct from one another. To ensure discriminant validity, cross-loadings were examined and it was confirmed that each indicator loaded the highest on its intended construct.

Overall, the measurement model demonstrated strong psychometric properties, indicating that the constructs were reliably and validly measured. These results provide a robust foundation for the subsequent structural model analysis and hypothesis testing. Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the factor loadings, reliability coefficients, and validity statistics.

Table 1. Measurement Model: Reliability and Validity Assessment

Construct	Indicator	Std. Loading	Cronbach's α	CR AVE
Regulation Acceptance	RA1	0.78	0.88	0.890.62
	RA2	0.81		
	RA3	0.76		
	RA4	0.83		
	RA5	0.74		
Free Speech Concern	FSC1	0.82	0.86	0.870.63
	FSC2	0.79		
	FSC3	0.77		
	FSC4	0.81		
Ideological Orientation	IDEO1	0.75	0.8	0.820.6
	IDEO2	0.78		
	IDEO3	0.8		
Digital Literacy	DL1	0.81	0.85	0.860.61
	DL2	0.78		
	DL3	0.76		
	DL4	0.8		
Information Consumption Habits	INFO1	0.74	0.79	0.810.59
	INFO2	0.77		
	INFO3	0.8		
	INFO4	0.72		
Strong-Tie Trust	STT1	0.83	0.87	0.880.65
	STT2	0.8		
	STT3	0.78		
Weak-Tie Trust	WTT1	0.76	0.82	0.840.64
	WTT2	0.81		
	WTT3	0.83		
Institutional Trust	IT1	0.84	0.9	0.910.67
	IT2	0.82		
	IT3	0.8		
	IT4	0.85		
Platform Trust	PT1	0.79	0.88	0.890.66
	PT2	0.83		
	PT3	0.81		
	PT4	0.78		

5. Results

5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Convergent validity was confirmed as all standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and above 0.70, and all AVE values exceeded 0.50. Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT ratio. Taken together, these results confirm that the measurement model exhibits strong psychometric properties and is suitable for structural model estimation.

The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was used as a complementary indicator. The SRMR value of 0.047 was below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating an acceptable model fit. This model demonstrates substantial explanatory power. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for Regulation Acceptance was 0.42, indicating that the proposed model explained 42 percent of the variance in public acceptance of digital content regulation, which represents substantial explanatory power in social science research. Predictive relevance was assessed using Stone–Geisser's Q^2 via a blindfolding procedure. All Q^2 values exceeded zero, confirming the predictive relevance of the endogenous construct.

5.2 Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Structural relationships were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. Table 2 summarizes the standardized path coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels. Results indicate that concerns over freedom of expression exert a significant negative effect on acceptance of digital content regulation ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Individual-level factors—ideological orientation, digital literacy, and information consumption habits— have positive but

comparatively modest effects on regulation acceptance, providing partial support for H2.

All four dimensions of relational trust demonstrated statistically significant positive effects on the acceptance of digital content regulation. Institutional trust emerges as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), followed by platform trust ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), strong-tie trust ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$), and weak-tie trust ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.001$). These findings provide robust support for H3, H4, and H5, underscoring the central role of relational trust, particularly institutional trust, in shaping regulatory acceptance. The effect size estimates (f^2) further indicate that institutional trust has a large effect, whereas strong-tie, weak-tie, and platform trust exhibit small-to-moderate effects. Individual-level factors had relatively small effect sizes.

Table 2. Structural Equation Model Results (H1–H8)

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Std. β	SE	p-value	Result
H1	Free Speech Concern $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	-0.27	0.05	<0.001	Supported
H2a	Ideological Orientation $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.18	0.06	0.003	Supported
H2b	Digital Literacy $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.14	0.05	0.007	Supported
H2c	Information Consumption Habits $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.12	0.05	0.021	Supported
H3	Strong-Tie Trust $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.21	0.04	<0.001	Supported
H4a	Weak-Tie Trust $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.17	0.05	0.001	Supported
H4b	Platform Trust $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.24	0.04	<0.001	Supported
H5	Institutional Trust $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	0.46	0.04	<0.001	Supported

5.3 Mediation Analysis

To test H6, a mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping with 5,000 re-samples. The results indicate that relational trust significantly mediates the relationship between freedom of expression concerns and regulation acceptance. The indirect effect is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.15$, 95% CI [-0.21, -0.09]). After accounting for relational trust, the direct effect of freedom of expression concerns on regulation acceptance becomes statistically insignificant, indicating full mediation. This finding suggests that trust functions as a key intervening mechanism through which concerns about freedom of expression translate into regulatory opposition or acceptance.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis (H6)

Hypothesis	Indirect Path	Indirect β	SE	95% CI	Result
H6	Free Speech Concern $\rightarrow$ Trust $\rightarrow$ Regulation Acceptance	-0.15	0.03	[-0.21, -0.09]	Supported

Bootstrap = 5000 samples

5.4 Moderation and Multigroup Analysis

Moderation hypotheses (H7 and H8) were tested using partial least squares multigroup analysis (PLS-MGA). The results reveal systematic spatial and generational differences in the effects of trust on regulation acceptance. Regarding urban–rural moderation (H7), strong-tie trust exerts a significantly stronger effect in rural areas ($\beta = 0.32$) than in urban areas ($\beta = 0.10$). In contrast, weak-tie trust and platform trust have stronger effects among urban residents ($\beta = 0.26$ and $\beta = 0.29$, respectively). These findings support H7 and indicate that the influence of trust varies across spatial contexts. Generational differences further moderate the trust–regulation relationship (H8). Institutional trust has a stronger effect among older respondents ($\beta = 0.53$), whereas platform trust plays a more prominent role among younger respondents ($\beta = 0.38$). These statistically significant differences support H8 and underscore the context-dependent nature of relational trust effects on regulation acceptance.

Table 4. Moderation Analysis – Multigroup SEM (H7, H8)

H7. Location (Urban vs. Rural)

Path	Rural β	Urban β	Result
Strong-Tie Trust $\rightarrow$ RA	0.32*	0.10	
Weak-Tie Trust $\rightarrow$ RA	0.08	0.26*	
Platform Trust $\rightarrow$ RA	0.11	0.29*	Supported

H8. Age / Generation

Path	Older β	Younger β	Result
Institutional Trust $\rightarrow$ RA	0.53*	0.31***	
Platform Trust $\rightarrow$ RA	0.12	0.38*	Supported

5.5 Structural Model Results

In line with established PLS-SEM conventions, this study did not rely on global goodness-of-fit indices as a primary criterion for model evaluation. The evaluation of the structural model focused on explanatory power, predictive relevance, and the absence of estimation problems. As a complementary diagnostic indicator, the standardized root mean square

residual (SRMR) was examined. The SRMR value of 0.047 falls below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating an acceptable level of approximate model fit and no substantial model misspecification. In addition, collinearity diagnostics were conducted using variance inflation factors (VIF), and all values were below the recommended thresholds, suggesting that multicollinearity did not bias the estimation of the structural relationships.

Overall, the structural model demonstrates strong explanatory and predictive capacity. The acceptance of digital content regulation in Mongolia is shaped less by individual-level characteristics and more fundamentally by relational trust structures. Among these, institutional trust emerges as the most influential determinant of regulatory acceptance. Furthermore, the observed mediation and moderation effects indicate that regulatory acceptance does not arise from isolated individual attitudes but is embedded within socially structured trust relationships. Spatial and generational differences further condition these effects, underscoring that regulatory acceptance emerges through context-dependent, relational mechanisms rather than uniform individual evaluations.

5.6 Discussion

This study examined the public acceptance of digital content regulation in Mongolia by shifting the analytical focus from individual attitudes to relational trust structures embedded in social, institutional, and platform-based contexts. The findings provide strong empirical support for this relational perspective and offer several theoretical and substantive contributions to the ongoing debates on digital governance, platform regulation, and regulatory legitimacy.

The results demonstrate that the acceptance of digital content regulation is shaped less by individual-level characteristics, such as ideology, digital literacy, or information consumption habits, and more fundamentally by multilayered relational trust. Consistent with the proposed framework, institutional trust emerged as the most powerful predictor of regulatory acceptance, surpassing all other forms of trust and individual-level factors. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the centrality of political and institutional trust in shaping compliance with and support for regulatory interventions, particularly in contexts where legal authority alone is insufficient to generate legitimacy. More importantly, the dominance of institutional trust does not imply the irrelevance of social or platform-based trust. Rather, the results suggest a layered trust ecology, in which different trust relations operate simultaneously and interactively. Strong-tie trust rooted in family and close social networks, weak-tie trust associated with online communities and influencers, and platform trust in social media positively contribute to regulatory acceptance, albeit to varying magnitudes. This underscores that regulatory legitimacy is not produced solely through formal institutions but is socially embedded within everyday relational environments.

One of the key contributions of this study is the reconceptualization of the tension between freedom of expression and digital regulation. While concerns over freedom of expression are negatively associated with regulatory acceptance, mediation analysis reveals that this relationship is not direct. Instead, relational trust fully mediates the effect of concerns about freedom of expression on the acceptance of regulation. In high-trust environments, apprehensions about potential restrictions on speech do not translate into outright opposition to regulations. This finding challenges the binary framings that portray freedom of expression and harm prevention as inherently incompatible. Rather, it suggests that trust functions as a critical social mechanism through which regulatory interventions are interpreted as protective, legitimate, coercive, or illegitimate. By identifying trust as an intervening mechanism, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how democratic values are negotiated in platform-mediated public spheres. Moderation analyses further demonstrated that relational trust operates in context-specific ways. Urban–rural differences reveal distinct trust configurations: strong-tie trust plays a more influential role in rural areas, whereas weak-tie and platform trust exert greater influence among urban residents. These findings reflect differences in social structures, media ecosystems, and patterns of information circulation across spatial contexts.

Similarly, generational differences highlight the shifting foundations of regulatory legitimacy. Institutional trust is more salient among older cohorts, whereas platform trust plays a stronger role among younger respondents. This generational divergence reflects broader transformations in authority structures and information environments in which younger users increasingly rely on platforms as primary intermediaries of public information. These results suggest that regulatory acceptance is not monolithic, but contingent upon evolving social and technological contexts. By focusing on Mongolia, this study contributes to an emerging body of scholarship examining digital governance beyond Western and large-state contexts. Small states operating under asymmetric power relations with global platforms face unique challenges because platform infrastructures often exercise *de facto* governance that precedes or constrains national regulatory capacity. The findings demonstrate that in such contexts, public acceptance of regulation depends not only on formal legal design but also on the relational trust networks through which regulation is socially evaluated. Thus, the relational trust framework advanced in this study extends existing theories of platform governance by foregrounding legitimacy as a socially constructed outcome rather than a purely institutional or legal one. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more culturally contextualized and relationally grounded approaches to understanding regulation in the digital age.

5.7 Implications for Theory and Practice

Taken together, these findings suggest that efforts to improve digital content regulation should not focus exclusively on technical enforcement mechanisms or legal sanctions. Instead, regulatory strategies must account for the relational environment in which citizens interpret and respond to regulatory interventions. Strengthening institutional transparency, fostering trust through inclusive governance processes, and acknowledging the roles of platforms and social networks as trust mediators are crucial for enhancing regulatory legitimacy. Theoretically, this study advances the relational turn in the analysis of digital governance by demonstrating that trust operates as a central mechanism linking democratic values, institutional authority, and public acceptance. This perspective opens new avenues for comparative research across different political, cultural, and technological contexts.

6. Policy Implications

The findings offer several important implications for policymakers seeking to design legitimate and effective digital content regulations in platform-mediated information environments, particularly in small states that operate under asymmetric power relations with global platforms.

First, the central role of institutional trust suggests that regulatory effectiveness cannot be achieved through legal enforcement alone. Policies that lack transparency, procedural fairness, and accountability risk undermining public acceptance, even when their stated objectives involve harm prevention or public safety. Therefore, governments should prioritize transparent decision-making processes, clearly defined regulatory mandates, and independent oversight mechanisms to strengthen institutional credibility and public trust.

Second, the mediating role of relational trust indicates that concerns about freedom of expression do not automatically translate into opposition to regulations. Rather, these concerns become politically salient in the contexts of low trust. Thus, policymakers should avoid framing digital regulation solely as a security or control issue and instead emphasize participatory and communicative governance approaches. Inclusive consultation processes involving journalists, civil society organizations, platform representatives, and ordinary users can help reframe regulation as a protective and rights-respecting intervention.

Third, the different effects of strong-tie, weak-tie, and platform-based trust underscore the importance of context-sensitive regulatory strategies. In rural areas, where strong-tie trust plays a more prominent role, information campaigns and regulatory communication may be more effective when mediated through local communities, family networks, and trusted interpersonal channels. By contrast, in urban settings, engagement with online communities, influencers, and digital intermediaries may be more effective in shaping public understanding and acceptance of regulatory measures.

Fourth, generational differences in trust dynamics suggest that a one-size-fits-all regulatory approach is unlikely to succeed. Older citizens tend to rely more heavily on institutional trust, whereas younger users place more trust in the platforms themselves. Therefore, policymakers should consider differentiated communication and implementation strategies that acknowledge these generational trust asymmetries, particularly when addressing issues such as misinformation, content moderation, and platform accountability.

Finally, for small states, such as Mongolia, where global platforms effectively function as *de facto* regulators of information flows, national policy must be complemented by strategies that directly engage platform governance. This includes developing clearer expectations of platform responsibility, investing in regulatory expertise capable of interacting with global platforms, and pursuing regional or international cooperation to reduce asymmetries in regulatory power. Taken together, these implications highlight that sustainable digital content regulation depends not only on formal rules and enforcement capacity but also on the cultivation of relational trust across institutions, platforms, and social networks. Policies that fail to account for these relational dynamics risk eroding legitimacy and public support, whereas trust-sensitive regulatory approaches are likely to achieve durable and democratically acceptable outcomes.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the analysis relies on cross-sectional survey data, which limits the ability to make strong causal claims about the dynamic relationships among trust, freedom of expression concerns, and regulatory acceptance. Longitudinal or experimental designs can provide deeper insight into how trust and regulatory legitimacy evolve over time, particularly in response to policy changes or platform interventions.

Second, although the sample captures key demographic groups actively engaged in digital platforms, it is not fully nationally representative. Future studies can employ probability-based sampling or larger-scale surveys to enhance the generalizability and examine regional variations in greater detail.

Third, this study conceptualizes relational trust through four dimensions—strong-tie, weak-tie, institutional, and platform trust. While this framework captures key relational environments, future research can further disaggregate trust

relationships; for example, by distinguishing between trust in different types of platforms, media organizations, or state institutions, or by incorporating network-based measures of information flow.

Finally, the Mongolian case offers valuable insights into digital governance in small states operating under asymmetric platform power. Comparative research across other small or post-socialist states would help clarify the extent to which the observed trust mechanisms are context-specific or generalizable across different political and cultural settings.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the public acceptance of digital content regulation by shifting analytical attention from individual attitudes to the relational trust structures through which regulatory legitimacy is socially constructed. Drawing on survey data from Mongolia, the findings demonstrate that acceptance of digital regulation is not primarily determined by ideological orientation, digital literacy, or information consumption habits, but by multilayered trust relations embedded in social networks, institutions, and digital platforms. Across all analyses, institutional trust emerged as the most influential determinant of regulatory acceptance, underscoring the central role of state legitimacy in shaping public responses to regulatory interventions. At the same time, strong-tie trust rooted in family and close social networks, weak-tie trust associated with online communities and influencers, and platform trust in digital intermediaries exert independent and significant effects. These results suggest that regulatory legitimacy is produced within a layered trust ecology rather than through a single institutional channel.

A key contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of the relationship between freedom of expression and digital regulation. While concerns about freedom of expression are negatively associated with regulatory acceptance, mediation analysis reveals that this relationship is fully mediated by relational trust. In other words, apprehensions about speech restrictions do not automatically translate into opposition to regulations; instead, their political significance depends on the trust environment in which the regulation is interpreted. This finding challenges binary framings that portray freedom of expression and harm prevention as inherently incompatible, and highlights trust as a central mechanism through which democratic values are negotiated in platform-mediated public spheres. Moderation analyses further demonstrate that trust operates in context-sensitive ways. Urban–rural and generational differences reveal distinct configurations of trust, reflecting variations in social structures, media ecosystems, and authority relations. These findings emphasize that regulatory acceptance is neither uniform nor static but contingent upon spatial, generational, and technological contexts. By focusing on Mongolia, a small post-socialist state operating under asymmetric power relations with global platforms, this study contributes to the growing body of literature seeking to decenter Western and large-state perspectives in digital governance research. The results illustrate how platform infrastructure and moderation regimes exercise *de facto* governance over national information environments, while the public acceptance of regulations remains grounded in locally embedded trust relations. In doing so, the study advances a relational trust framework that is applicable beyond Mongolia and offers a basis for comparative research across diverse political and cultural settings.

Overall, this study underscores that sustainable and democratically legitimate digital content regulations cannot rely solely on legal authority, technical enforcement, or platform compliance. Instead, effective regulation depends on trust-sensitive governance strategies that recognize the social foundations of legitimacy in the digital age. By foregrounding relational trust as a core analytical lens, this study opens new avenues for understanding how regulation, democracy, and platform power intersect in contemporary information societies.

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Author contributions

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