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The Influence of Using #ACAB on Platform X as a Form of Hashtag Activism on Students' Trust in Mainstream Media

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Abstract

This research is motivated by the increasing use of social media as a space for public criticism, particularly through hashtag activism practices such as the use of the hashtag #ACAB on platform X, which has the potential to influence how students assess the credibility of mainstream media in reporting sensitive issues. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the use of the hashtag #ACAB on platform X and the level of student trust in mainstream media. This research method uses a descriptive method with a quantitative approach. The population in this study were active students who use platform X, with 21 students aged 18-23 years as the target respondents. The results of this study indicate that the level of #ACAB use on platform X is high, while the level of trust in mainstream media is low. The results of the quadratic regression analysis indicate that #ACAB usage is significantly associated with students' trust in mainstream media in a non-linear U-shaped relationship, with a contribution of 31.6%. At low to medium levels of use, increased #ACAB use tends to decrease trust in mainstream media, but at high levels of use, the relationship reverses and tends to increase trust. The limitations of this study lie in the focus of the analysis which is only on one hashtag (#ACAB) on Platform X and on student respondents, so that the findings cannot be generalized to other platforms, different activism hashtags, or wider community groups. This study contributes to providing empirical evidence based on statistical data regarding the relationship between variables, which can serve as a reference for developing quantitative studies in communication and media studies.

KEYWORDS

hashtag activism; #acab; platform x; public trust; mainstream media.

Introduction

The development of communication and information technology has brought about major changes in the way society interacts, accesses, and understands information. This digital transformation has not only changed media consumption patterns but also given rise to new spaces for expression, such as platform X (formerly known as Twitter), which has now become a means for people to voice their opinions and shape public discourse freely. One form of this digital expression is seen in the phenomenon of hashtag activism, including the virality of #ACAB (#All Cops Are Bastards) which is used to criticize the actions of the authorities and the way mainstream media reports on social issues. The active users of platform X in Indonesia have reached 24.8 million people, making it one of the main media for the public to build online conversations ([We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, the Trust Barometer report shows that Indonesians' trust in mainstream media is only 62%, down from 68% the previous year. This indicates a potential shift in public trust from conventional media to the digital space, where people place more trust in narratives constructed by fellow users than in formal media institutions ([Edelman, 2023](#)). Thus, the relationship between the #ACAB hashtag phenomenon, the role of platform X, and trust in mainstream media is relevant to study in the context of mass communication in the digital era ([Edelman, 2023](#)). Initial findings indicate that one of the digital spaces widely used by the public to express views and

build collective conversations is platform X (formerly Twitter). This platform allows users to convey ideas in short texts accompanied by interactions between users through replies, likes, and reposts. These characteristics make platform X a dynamic space for building social discourse, where messages can develop and be interpreted collectively by its users (Gupta et al., 2020).

Changes in people's information consumption behavior are clearly evident in the increasing use of digital platforms, according to a report by *We Are Social & Meltwater (2024)*. There are over 167 million active social media users in Indonesia, and 73.5% of them use platform X (formerly Twitter) as a source of news and discussion of public issues. This phenomenon aligns with the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2023) survey, which showed that public trust in global mainstream media has declined to just 40%, while 56% of respondents said they trust information circulating on digital social media platforms more. This data indicates a significant shift in public trust in conventional media and the increasing influence of new media as participatory spaces (Kemp, 2024). The research findings confirm that digital activism through hashtags acts as a form of resistance against the dominance of institutional discourse. Social media is positioned as an alternative source of public trust when mainstream media is perceived as biased (Sudirman et al., 2024).

However, the development of digital space has not only facilitated communication but also created new dynamics in how users interpret information. The rapid and diverse flow of information allows for multiple interpretations that are not always aligned with each other. In this context, users are no longer merely passive recipients of information, but are engaged in a process of evaluating, selecting, and constructing meaning based on their experiences and perspectives (Listiyani & Muliawati, 2023). This issue arises from the increasing use of digital symbols as a means of collectively conveying attitudes and experiences. One such symbol that has developed in the digital space is the use of hashtags as a form of grouping and expressing shared attitudes. Hashtags serve not only as topic markers but also as a tool for building collective identity and voicing views held by many users (Ksiazek et al., 2023).

Based on the background description, the practice of hashtag activism has become a prominent phenomenon in the digital space. One form of hashtag activism that is widely used is #ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards). This hashtag emerged and is used by users of platform X as a symbol of expressing criticism and dissatisfaction with certain narratives that are developing in the digital public space. The use of the hashtag #ACAB reflects users' efforts to construct alternative meanings through shared symbols. This study aims to understand how the use of the hashtag #ACAB on platform X relates to how users construct and interpret the information they encounter. This study is directed at examining the formation of meaning through the use of hashtags, as well as how this practice shapes users' perspectives and attitudes toward information circulating in the digital space. This is in accordance with the research findings that hashtag activism builds narrative agency, namely the ability of social media users to maintain control of the narrative from the mainstream media. Hashtags function as a space for the articulation of collective experiences that are often ignored by mainstream media (Yang, 2016).

This study positions platform X users as active subjects in the digital communication process. Users are understood as individuals who consciously choose, use, and interpret digital symbols according to their needs and experiences. Thus, the use of hashtags is seen as part of the active process of users in constructing discourse and meaning collectively. To support this research entity, digital space is understood as an

arena of social interaction that allows for the continuous exchange of meaning. User activity in producing and disseminating messages through hashtags shows that digital communication is not one-way, but rather involves a dialogical process that forms a shared understanding among users. Within the theoretical framework, this study uses

The uses and gratifications theory serve only as a contextual background for understanding media user behavior. This theory explains that media users are active individuals with specific goals in using media, such as fulfilling needs for information, self-expression, and social interaction. In the context of this research, the use of the hashtag #ACAB is understood as fulfilling the need for expression and the search for meaning through digital spaces (Haridakis & Humphries, 2019).

Referring to previous research, the study entitled "Beyond Hashtags: #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Online Struggle for Justice in the Real World" explains that the use of hashtags in social media plays a crucial role in building social awareness and changing the way people interact with public issues. This study shows that hashtags such as #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter are able to mobilize broad public participation in voicing issues of social injustice and pressure on security forces in the United States (Philia, 2024). Furthermore, this study emphasizes that social media functions as a digital public space that allows people to form their own narratives outside the dominance of conventional media. Thus, this study is relevant to this study because both studies discuss the phenomenon of hashtag use as a means of public expression and criticism of dominant narratives (Freelon et al., 2017).

The subsequent study, "Computational Propaganda in Hashtag Activism," examines how social media algorithms and digital strategies are utilized to shape public opinion in hashtag activism practices. This study highlights that the use of hashtags on social media is not only a means of public expression but can also be used to construct certain narratives that influence public perception of social issues. The results of the study indicate that digital activity through hashtags can strengthen public social awareness, but on the other hand, it also has the potential to create information bias if it is exploited massively by certain groups for political or ideological interests (Pontoh, 2021).

Based on these two previous studies, it appears that hashtag activism plays a significant role in the dynamics of digital communication. However, studies specifically examining the use of the #ACAB hashtag and its impact on how users interpret and trust information are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of platform X.

Based on the description and presentation of the research, there is a research gap, where unlike previous studies that generally focus on hashtag activism as a means of digital mobilization or analysis of social criticism discourse in bold media, this study specifically examines the influence of the use



Figure 1. Mass Action with #ACAB and #1312 Banners in Indonesia

Source: trends.tribunnews.com, 2025

of the hashtag #ACAB on platform X on the level of student trust in mainstream media (see figure 1). This study not only views hashtags as an instrument for disseminating messages, but also as a medium for constructing meaning that can influence how users view the credibility of the information disseminated (Williams et al., 2023). In addition, this study opens up space for exploration of the possibility of a non-linear relationship pattern between the intensity of exposure to the hashtag #ACAB and the level of student trust in mainstream media, thus offering a new perspective that goes beyond the linear approach that has been dominant in studies of digital activism and media discourse. The novelty of this research lies in the empirical testing of the #ACAB activism hashtag on Platform X as a contemporary digital communication phenomenon and its relationship with students' trust in mainstream media, which has rarely been studied quantitatively in the Indonesian context (Yulanda, 2020).

Methods

The research method used is a survey correlation, which aims to determine the relationship or level of association between two or more variables based on data obtained through questionnaires distributed to respondents. In this study, the researcher does not provide special treatment to the variables, but rather observes and analyzes whether there is a relationship between the variables studied, whether a positive relationship, a negative relationship, or a level of strength. The survey correlation approach is used to describe the tendency of the relationship between variables in a specific population objectively and measurably. In the context of this study, it was chosen because the aim is to describe the relationship between hashtag use and user trust perceptions on digital platforms based on questionnaire data collected from respondents (Zuraida, 2025).

The research variables used in this study consist of two types, namely independent variables (free variables) and dependent variables (dependent variables). Independent variables are variables that influence or cause changes in other variables, while dependent variables are variables that influence or are the result of independent variables. This understanding is important so that the relationship between variables can be clearly explained in the context of the phenomenon being studied. The independent variable (X) in this study is the use of #ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) on platform X as a form of hashtag activism. The use of #ACAB has several dimensions, namely, the level of exposure to #ACAB, the level of user participation in using #ACAB (such as viewing, liking, sharing, or making posts with the hashtag), the intensity of user engagement in discourse related to #ACAB, and the subjective meaning of users towards #ACAB as a form of social criticism. The dependent variable (bound variable) is a variable that is suspected to be a result of or influenced by the preceding variable. The dependent variable (Y) in this study is public trust in mainstream media. Public trust has several dimensions, namely, media intelligence in presenting information, objectivity and balance of news reporting, honesty and transparency of the media in conveying facts, and media credibility as a source of information that can be trusted by the public (Nurhadi, 2020; Susianti, 2024).

The data collection technique in this study was carried out using a questionnaire, namely a structured instrument to collect numerical data from respondents who meet the research criteria. Questionnaires are one of the data collection tools commonly used in quantitative descriptive

research because they are able to obtain information about respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences directly and systematically, thus making it easier for researchers to process and analyze the data statistically. Previous research studies have shown that questionnaires are effective in describing the characteristics of respondents in descriptive research because the statements in the questionnaire can be measured on an objective scale (Zuraida, 2025).

The population in this study were users of platform X who knew or had interacted with #ACAB. The research sample was determined using a purposive sampling technique, with the criteria being that respondents were active users of platform X and had knowledge of using #ACAB. This technique was chosen to ensure the data obtained was in line with the research objectives.

The data collected was obtained from the results of a correlational survey. This analysis was conducted by processing the questionnaire data to obtain an overview of the respondents' response tendencies for each studied variable. The results are presented as percentages and descriptive interpretations to explain the relationship between #ACAB usage and user trust in the information (see table 1).

Table 1. Operationalization Variables

Variabel	Dimension	Indicator	Measurement
Use of #ACAB (X)	Eksposur Hashtag (Exposure)	It is likely that users often see the hashtags #1312 and #ACAB on social media	Likert Scale
	Participate in Hashtags	Level of public engagement (likes, retweets, comments, reposts) Tendency to use hashtags	
Student Trust in Mainstream Media (Y)	Objectivity of Reporting	Public assessment of media neutrality in covering demonstration issues	
	Accuracy and Transparency of Information	Public confidence in the accuracy of the facts presented Perceptions of excessive data manipulation or framing	

Source: Research Results, 2025

Result and Discussion

The results of this study begin with a description of the respondents' characteristics, intended to identify them and facilitate the researcher's analysis. Based on the research data obtained through the distribution of questionnaires to 21 respondents, the researchers grouped the respondents into one category, namely by gender. Respondents were not determined by age or orientation because this study focused on a relatively homogeneous group of respondents. Respondent characteristics based on gender are shown in table 2.

Gender

Based on table 2, it can be explained that the characteristics of the respondents, totaling 21 people based on gender in this

study, have a percentage of 9.5% male or as many as 2 people and 90.5% female or as many as 19 people. This means that in this study the respondents are dominated by women compared to men (Zuhri & Amalia, 2022). Thus, it can be concluded that the participation of female respondents in this study is higher than that of male respondents, findings primarily represent the perspectives of female respondents. In terms of determining the results of the study based on respondents' answers to the distributed questionnaire, there is a need for assessment criteria for the scores obtained. The author presents these assessment criteria in table 3.

Recapitulation of Variables (X) Using #ACAB

Based on the analysis of the #ACAB Usage variable on

Table 3. Summary of Variable X Scores

No	Indicator	Cumulative Amount	Average score
1	Frequency		
	I once saw a post on platform X that contained #ACAB	83	3,95
	In the past week, posts with #ACAB have frequently appeared on timelines	86	4,10
	In the past week, liking activity on #ACAB posts has been frequently seen	87	4,10
2	Duration		
	Posts with #ACAB are often read to the end	80	4,14
	Time spent viewing posts with #ACAB is relatively long	82	3,81
	Videos or narratives with #ACAB are often watched to the end	83	3,90
3	Tension		
	#ACAB attracted attention when it appeared on platform X	83	3,95
	The message in the #ACAB post was easy to understand	83	3,90
	The narrative conveyed through #ACAB was deemed important to pay attention to	84	4,00
	Posts with #ACAB often become the subject of discussion	85	4,05

Source: Research Results, 2025

Table 4. Summary of Y Variable Scores

No	Indicator	Cumulative Amount	Average score
1	Cognitive		
	Mainstream media portrays incidents of violence involving security forces in a comprehensive and transparent manner	61	2,905
	Mainstream media coverage of police freezes is presented based on facts on the ground	59	2,810
	The information conveyed by mainstream media regarding security force actions is easily understood by the public	55	2,619
	Mainstream media clearly explain the chronology of security force violence without forcing facts	54	2,571
2	Affective		
	I consider mainstream media to be fair in reporting on incidents of violence perpetrated by the police	51	2,429
	Mainstream media coverage of police actions fosters trust in the veracity of the information conveyed	53	2,524
	I view mainstream media as siding with victims in incidents of violence involving police	54	2,571
	Mainstream media coverage of police violence fosters disappointment in the media's performance	56	2,667
3	Conative		
	After seeing mainstream media coverage, I became more interested in seeking further information about police violence through social media	58	2,762
	I preferred to trust information about suspensions from mainstream media rather than from social media	54	2,571
	I shared information about police violence more often if it came from platform X than from mainstream media	56	2,667
	I rarely used mainstream media as my primary reference for information about cases of police violence	58	2,762
	When violence occurred, I sought information more often through social media than through mainstream media	55	2,619

Source: Research Results, 2025

Platform X, which consists of the frequency, duration, and attention dimensions, it was found that all dimensions were in the high category. In the frequency dimension, the average score ranged from 3.95 to 4.10. This indicates that respondents quite frequently saw posts containing the #ACAB hashtag, both in the

Table 2. Research Informant Data

No.	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Male	2	9,5%
2.	Female	19	90,5%
Total		21	100%

Source: Questionnaire (Primary Data Processing Results, 2025)

form of appearances on the timeline and through visible interactions such as like activities. Thus, it can be concluded that the #ACAB hashtag has a high level of appearance on Platform X. In the duration dimension, the average score ranged from 3.81 to 4.14. These results indicate that respondents not only glanced at #ACAB posts, but also tended to read or watch the content until the end and spent a relatively long time consuming it.

Meanwhile, in the attention dimension, the average score ranged from 3.90 to 4.05. This indicates that the hashtag #ACAB was able to attract respondents' attention, was easy to understand, was considered important, and even became a frequent topic of discussion. Thus, the hashtag #ACAB was not only visually present, but also received cognitive attention from respondents. Overall, these results indicate that the level of use and exposure of the hashtag #ACAB on Platform X was in the high category, both in terms of frequency of appearance, duration of consumption, and the level of respondents' attention to the content.

Recapitulation of Variable (Y) Student Trust in Mainstream Media (see table 4)

In this section, the researcher will explain the discussion based on the research results obtained through statistical data processing.

Interpretation of Key Findings

Based on the analysis, it can be explained that the Student Trust in Mainstream Media variable, which consists of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions, showed relatively low average scores across all indicators. In the cognitive dimension, the average score was 2.905 for the indicator "mainstream media presents incidents of violence involving officers comprehensively and openly," 2.810 for the indicator "reporting is presented based on facts on the ground," 2.619 for the indicator "information is easy to understand," and 2.571 for the indicator "media explains the chronology clearly without providing core facts." These results indicate that respondents tend to assume that mainstream media is not yet fully considered complete and factual, easy to understand, and transparent in reporting incidents of violence involving officers.

The results of this discussion indicate a statistical relationship between the use of the hashtag #ACAB on Platform X and students' level of trust in mainstream media. This finding confirms that hashtag activism can be understood as a form of

digital communication practice that measures its influence on audience attitudes toward media institutions. Quantitatively, this relationship is reflected in the correlation and significance values obtained, which indicate that the intensity of exposure and engagement with hashtags is related to variations in respondents' levels of trust, without claiming a direct causal relationship. This finding aligns with studies on digital activism

Table 5. Results of the Validity Test for the Use of #ACAB (X)

Item	Correlation coefficient of the problem	r _{tabel}	Question Items
X1	0,440	0,433	Valid
X2	0,306		Valid
X3	0,402		Valid
X4	0,379		Valid
X5	0,423		Valid
X6	0,344		Valid
X7	0,415		Valid
X8	0,312		Valid
X9	0,463		Valid
X10	0,163		Valid

Source: Research Results, 2025

Table 6. Results of the Validity Test of Student Trust in Mainstream Media (Y)

Item	Correlation coefficient of the problem	r _{tabel}	Question Items
Y1	0,591	0,433	Valid
Y2	0,760		Valid
Y3	0,737		Valid
Y4	0,391		Valid
Y5	0,470		Valid
Y6	0,623		Valid
Y7	0,614		Valid
Y8	0,767		Valid
Y9	0,424		Valid
Y10	0,484		Valid
Y11	0,764		Valid
Y12	0,819		Valid
Y13	0,630		Valid

Source: Research Results, 2025

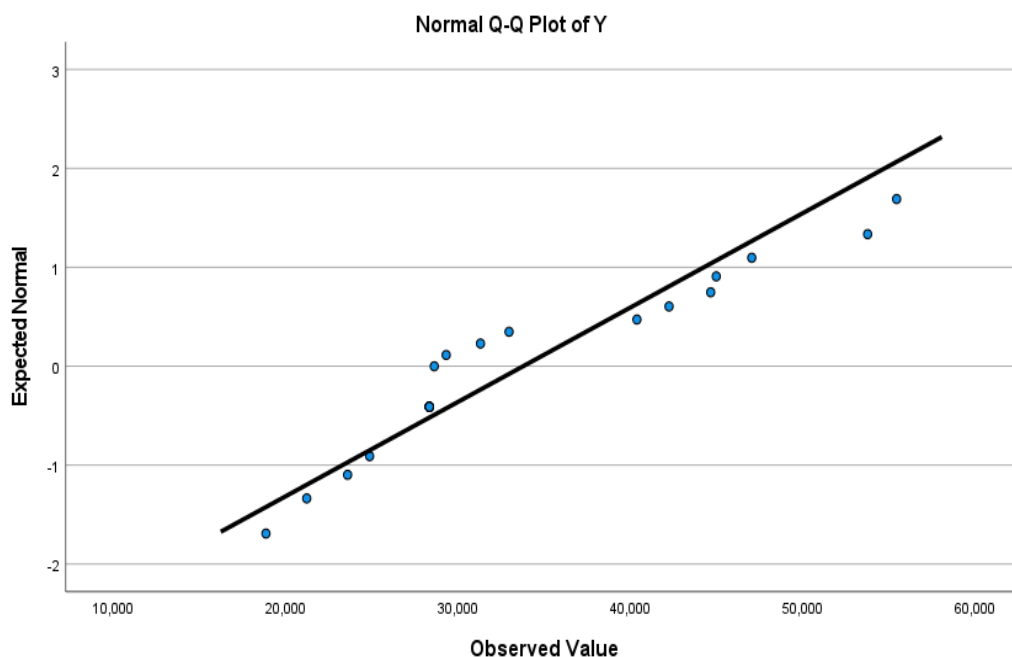


Figure 2. Simple Regression Plot

and connective action that view social media as a space for the production of collective meaning through shared symbols and narratives. In this context, the hashtag #ACAB functions as a symbol of criticism of the authority and representation of mainstream media, which then stops with students' evaluation of the credibility of mainstream media. Thus, this study expands the discourse on digital communication by presenting statistical evidence that hashtag activism practices are not only expressive but also related to attitudes of trust toward media institutions in the digital public space.

In the affective dimension, the average score obtained was 2.429 for the indicator "media is considered fair", 2.524 for the indicator "reporting creates a sense of trust", 2.571 for the indicator "media takes the side of the victim", and 2.667 for the indicator "reporting creates a sense of disappointment". These results indicate that emotionally respondents tend to distrust the mainstream media, consider the media to be less fair, and actually feel disappointed with the media's performance in reporting incidents of violence by the authorities.

Meanwhile, in the conative dimension, the average score obtained was 2.762 for the indicator "more interested in seeking further information through social media", 2.571 for the indicator "preferring to trust mainstream media over social media", 2.667 for the indicator "more often sharing information from platform

X", 2.762 for the indicator "mainstream media is rarely used as the main reference", and 2.619 for the indicator "more often seeking information through social media when violence occurs". These results indicate that behaviorally respondents tend to rely more on social media than mainstream media in seeking, trusting, and disseminating information related to violence by the authorities.

Overall, these results indicate that students' trust in mainstream media is low, across cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. Therefore, it can be concluded that respondents in this study tended to have little trust in mainstream media as a primary source of information regarding incidents of police violence during torture (see [Table 5](#) and [Table 6](#)).

Simple Regression Plot PP Results

The Normal Q-Q Plot is used to determine whether the Y variable data is normally distributed by comparing the observed values with the expected values if the data are normally distributed. The test criterion is that if the data points are spread out and follow the diagonal line, then the data can be said to be approaching a normal distribution. Conversely, if the data points deviate far from the diagonal line, then the data is not normally distributed.

Based on the Normal Q-Q Plot of Variable Y, it can be seen that most of the data points are located around and follow the direction of the diagonal line, although there are some points that deviate slightly at the beginning and end of the distribution. However, these deviations are not extreme and do not show a systematic deviation pattern. This result indicates that the visual distribution of variable Y data can be said to be close to a normal distribution, although there are slight deviations at several points. Thus, based on the Normal Q-Q Plot, the data variable Y is generally assumed to meet visual normality. After the normality assumption is met, a simple linear regression analysis is conducted to test the research hypothesis. Through the ANOVA table, the significance value in the Deviation from Linearity section is 0.022, which is smaller than 0.05. This indicates that there is a deviation from the linear relationship form, so the relationship between variables X and Y is not linear (see [Figure 2](#)).

The results of the linearity test indicate that the relationship between the independent and dependent variables is nonlinear, so a simple linear regression model is

not fully adequate to explain the relationship. Therefore, the analysis was continued using a non-linear regression model in the form of quadratic regression, which allows researchers to identify the presence of a curvilinear relationship between the variables.

Based on the Model Summary table, the correlation coefficient value is obtained as $R = 0.563$ and the determination coefficient value is $R_{\text{Square}} = 0.316$. This shows that the variable Use of #ACAB on Platform X is able to explain 31.6% of the variation in the variable Student Trust in Mainstream Media, while the remaining 68.4% is influenced by other factors outside the research model. The Adjusted R_{Square} value of 0.240 shows that the contribution of the variable Use of #ACAB on Platform X to Student Trust in Mainstream Media is at a moderate level after being adjusted for the number of variables and sample size.

Furthermore, based on the Coefficient table, it is obtained that the regression coefficient for the linear component of the Use of #ACAB on Platform X is $B = -3.033$ with a significance value of 0.011 (<0.05), which means that the Use of #ACAB on Platform X has a significant negative influence on Student Trust in Mainstream Media. In addition, the regression coefficient for the quadratic component of the Use of #ACAB on Platform X is $B = 4.086 \times 10^{-5}$ with a significance value of 0.010 (<0.05), which indicates a significant positive quadratic influence.

The combination of negative linear coefficients and positive quadratic coefficients indicates that the relationship between #ACAB Usage on Platform X and Student Trust in Mainstream Media forms a non-linear relationship pattern in the form of a U-shaped curve (U-shaped relationship). This means that at low to medium levels of #ACAB Usage on Platform X, increasing usage tends to decrease Student Trust in Mainstream Media, but after passing a certain point, increasing #ACAB Usage on Platform X actually increases Student Trust in Mainstream Media. Thus, based on the results of the quadratic regression, it can be concluded that there is a significant influence between #ACAB Usage on Platform X and Student Trust in Mainstream Media in a non-linear relationship pattern.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are supported by several previous studies, which explain that hashtag activism functions as a counter-mechanism to the dominance of mainstream media narratives. Hashtags enable social media users, particularly young people and students, to construct collective narratives based on their experiences, emotions, and dissatisfaction with formal institutions ([Wuriani, 2021; Yang, 2016](#)). Research in the global and Indonesian contexts shows a similar pattern, namely declining trust in the media. The mainstream pushes for the preservation of social media as a source of legitimate information ([Chakma, 2024; Sudirman et al., 2024](#)). In this context, hashtags like #ACAB can be understood as symbols of resistance, solidarity, and critique of the power relations between the authorities, the media, and the public ([Purwo & Puspasari, 2020](#)). Furthermore, several empirical studies have shown that hashtags not only build solidarity but also influence audience perceptions, trust, and attitudes toward the media ([Baker & Walsh, 2025; Zuraida, 2025](#)). Thus, the use of the hashtag #ACAB on platform X has the potential to mediate the relationship between digital student activism and their level of trust in mainstream media ([Manullang & Rahmanita, 2025](#)).

Consistently asserting that hashtag activism serves as an alternative communication space to address the failure of representation by mainstream media. Protest hashtags create symbolic convergence, namely the unification of users' collective meanings and emotions in response to injustices that are not adequately articulated by the media and authorities ([Djamaluddin et al., 2023](#)). This finding is in line with the fact that hashtags are used as a discursive strategy to reframe political issues, while also being a tool for citizens' critical

participation in the official narrative that strengthens the mainstream media (Athallah et al., 2025). Furthermore, that broadening understanding by positioning hashtag activism as a means of political education and the formation of critical awareness, especially when the mainstream media is perceived as slow, elitist, or insensitive to structural issues (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016, Manullang, 2025). This perspective is reinforced by seeing hashtag activism as an arena for the struggle for meaning and discourse hegemony, where the public actively challenges the dominance of mainstream media through alternative political communication practices (U. S., 2025; Zamhasari, 2024; Zulli, 2020). Overall, these four studies show that hashtags function not only as symbols of protest, but also as instruments of meaning-making, resistance, and critique of mainstream media authority.

This integrated analysis explains the transformation of political communication in the digital era, particularly through the use of social media and hashtags as a means of forming collective action and shifting trust in mainstream media. Bennett and Segerberg assert that contemporary political participation moves through a pattern of connective action, where individuals are connected by personal narratives circulated digitally without reliance on formal organizations. This pattern is reinforced by Poell and van Dijck, who show that social media forms a new ecosystem of activism communication that allows non-institutional actors to challenge the dominance of mainstream media in framing public issues. These findings are empirically supported by Theocharis et al. (2015), who prove that Twitter functions effectively as a tool for political mobilization and forming action repertoires, especially among the younger generation. In a more structural context, Fuchs views social media as an alternative public space that emerged due to the crisis of legitimacy of mainstream media, while Metzger et al. (2010) explain that audience trust in digital information is built through heuristic mechanisms and social interactions, making hashtags a crucial factor in shaping media credibility assessments (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Metzger et al., 2010; Muhlis, 2021; Poell & van Dijck, 2018; Theocharis et al., 2015).

Limitations and Caveats

This study has limitations due to its use of a correlational survey approach, which can only explain relationships between variables without directly establishing causality (Zamhuri, 2023). Furthermore, the research data relies on respondents' subjective perceptions and answers, potentially introducing interpretation bias and social bias into the questionnaire. The study's limited focus on the use of the #ACAB hashtag on platform X and a specific group of students also prevents the research results from being broadly generalizable to all social media users or other community groups. Therefore, the research results should be interpreted with caution as illustrative trends in the relationship between hashtag activism and levels of trust in mainstream media, rather than as absolute or universal conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is recommended to expand the study of hashtag activism in digital media using more diverse methodological approaches, such as mixed methods or longitudinal research, to examine changes in audience trust levels in greater depth and continuity. Furthermore, future research could expand the study to include various types of political hashtags or other social movements across various digital platforms, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of digital symbols on public perceptions of mainstream media. The addition of other variables, such as media literacy, intensity of social media

use, political polarity, and level of digital participation, is also important to explain the possibility of a more complex and not always linear relationship pattern between digital activism and audience trust.

Conclusion

The use of the #ACAB hashtag on Platform X plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of students' trust in mainstream media, although the influence is not linear and does not always run in one direction. The high intensity of students' exposure to #ACAB content indicates that critical issues against the authorities and mainstream media have become an important part of their information consumption on social media. The analysis results show that the use of #ACAB on Platform X contributes approximately 31.6% to the variation in Students' Trust in Mainstream Media. This indicates a moderate explanatory contribution, suggesting that the level of trust in mainstream media can be explained by the intensity of exposure to that media, pay attention to, and interact with #ACAB content. The remaining 68.4% is influenced by other factors outside the research model, such as ideological background, personal experience with media, social environment, and students' level of media literacy. Interestingly, the relationship formed is not a simple linear relationship, but rather a non-linear U-shaped relationship. At low to moderate levels of #ACAB usage, increased exposure tends to decrease trust in mainstream media as students are increasingly exposed to narratives of criticism and distrust. However, at very high levels of exposure. This demonstrates measurable patterns of statistical relationships between variables, as indicated by correlation and significance values, without drawing speculative conclusions about respondents' cognitive processes, which can ultimately lead to a partial restoration of trust in mainstream media as a reference source. These findings suggest that social media does not merely undermine trust in mainstream media, but acts as a space for negotiating meaning, where students compare, critique, and reassess media credibility. Therefore, the challenge for mainstream media is not simply to counter critical narratives on social media, but to rebuild trust through transparency, consistent journalistic quality, and openness to public criticism. Therefore, it can be concluded that #ACAB Use on Platform X has a significant but complex influence on Student Trust in Mainstream Media, and this influence can only be fully understood if viewed as a dynamic process influenced by the interaction between the intensity of social media usage, students' critical perceptions, and the credibility of the media institution itself. The recommendation of this research is that further studies expand the object of study by involving various activism hashtags, other social media platforms, and mixed method approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between digital activism and trust in mainstream media.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, Z.F.N.; methodology, Z.F.N., and I.D.; validation, Z.F.N., I.D.; formal analysis, I.D.; investigation, Z.F.N.; resources, Z.F.N.; data curation, H.M.; writing—original draft, Z.F.N.; writing—review and proof of concept, Z.F.N., H.M. and Z.F.N.; supervision, Z.F.N. and I.D. All authors have read and approved the published version of the manuscript.

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