

Media Literacy, Public Trust, and Audience Skepticism in Hyperlocal Homeless Media: A Content Analysis of Community Instagram Accounts in Bengkulu, Indonesia

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Abstract

The expansion of hyperlocal “homeless media” on social media has transformed how local communities access information, evaluate news, and negotiate trust in public institutions. This study investigates media literacy, public trust, and audience skepticism within hyperlocal homeless media in Bengkulu, Indonesia, focusing on community-managed Instagram accounts. Using qualitative content analysis, the research examines user comments posted on two influential accounts, Bengkulu Info and Info Bengkulu Raya, across issues of crime, social welfare, infrastructure, and public service provision. The findings indicate that audience trust in hyperlocal Instagram news is conditional and fragmented. Users depend on these accounts for fast, locally relevant updates, yet they frequently contest news framing, question institutional credibility, and criticize government performance. Media literacy emerges not only through fact-checking and corrections, but also through assessments of journalistic clarity, ethical implications, and reporting proportionality. In crime-related discussions, skepticism often escalates into moral panic and punitive attitudes, reflected in strong public support for coercive responses. Meanwhile, content on social welfare and public services tends to generate more empathetic engagement, although distrust toward political elites and bureaucratic actors remains persistent. This study argues that hyperlocal homeless media function as contested public arenas where trust and skepticism are continuously negotiated through participatory digital discourse. Audience skepticism, rather than signaling low media literacy, reflects active interpretation shaped by local experiences and institutional distrust.

Keywords: media literacy; public trust; audience skepticism; hyperlocal homeless media; community journalism; instagram-based news

INTRODUCTION

Social Social media has become a primary source of local information in Indonesia, particularly at the hyperlocal level where community-managed Instagram accounts function as informal news outlets. Often referred to as hyperlocal homeless media, these accounts operate without formal editorial structures or institutional oversight, yet they play a significant role in shaping everyday public discourse at the local level.

In Bengkulu, community Instagram accounts such as Bengkulu Info and Info Bengkulu Raya circulate updates on crime, public services, infrastructure, and social issues. Their appeal lies in immediacy, proximity, and local relevance, especially in regions where mainstream media offer limited and sporadic coverage (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2017). Audiences frequently rely on these accounts for timely information. However, such reliance does not necessarily imply unquestioned trust.

Studies on digital media audiences suggest that users engage with information through active interpretation rather than passive consumption, particularly in comment-based interactions where meanings, credibility, and responsibility are publicly negotiated (Livingstone, 2014; Nasrullah, 2015). Research on community-oriented and peripheral media in Indonesia further shows that audience responses often reflect local experience and social awareness, positioning comments as an important site of interpretive practice rather than mere reaction (Hasyim, Kartika, et al., 2025).

Trust remains a central mechanism in media use, enabling individuals to manage uncertainty in everyday information practices (Luhmann, 1979). In contemporary digital environments, trust is increasingly reflexive and conditional, shaped by continuous evaluation rather than institutional authority alone (Giddens, 1991). Research on public trust in digital and journalistic ecosystems indicates that skepticism frequently coexists with reliance, producing critical yet engaged audiences rather than outright rejection of information sources (Hasyim, Pratama, et al., 2025).

In hyperlocal Instagram environments, this reflexive engagement is often articulated through emotional language, humor, sarcasm, and moral judgment. Crime-related content tends to trigger punitive reactions, while posts related to infrastructure, welfare, and public services more often elicit empathy and civic demands directed at authorities. These emotional expressions function as forms of civic communication, linking personal experience with broader expectations of accountability (Papacharissi, 2015).

This study examines how media literacy, public trust, and audience skepticism are articulated in hyperlocal homeless media on Instagram in Bengkulu. Through qualitative content analysis of audience comments on Bengkulu Info and Info Bengkulu Raya, this research positions skepticism not

as a deficit but as an active, experience-based interpretive practice embedded in local digital culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interconnected perspectives: media trust, media literacy, and audience skepticism in digital environments. Together, these frameworks explain how audiences interpret and evaluate hyperlocal homeless media on Instagram.

Trust is understood as a mechanism that enables individuals to engage with information amid uncertainty (Luhmann, 1979). In contemporary digital contexts, trust is no longer taken for granted but formed reflexively through everyday experience (Giddens, 1991). Hyperlocal homeless media operate outside formal journalistic institutions, making trust situational rather than institutional. Audiences may rely on these accounts for local updates while simultaneously questioning their credibility or the authorities involved.

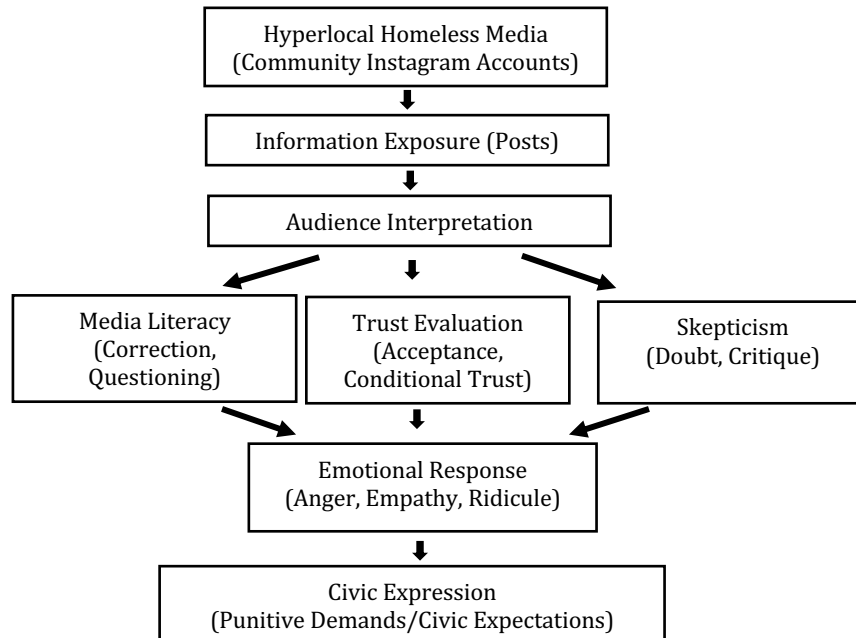
Media literacy is conceptualized as an interpretive practice rather than a purely technical skill. It involves assessing clarity, relevance, framing, and responsibility (Livingstone, 2014; Potter, 2004). On social media, literacy becomes visible through public interaction. Practices such as questioning headlines, correcting information, or proposing alternative explanations reflect active engagement, especially in the absence of professional editorial control.

Audience skepticism is treated as a reflexive response shaped by lived experience with governance, public services, and law enforcement. Skepticism does not imply rejection of information but signals critical evaluation. In crime-related posts, skepticism often intersects with moral judgment. Public reactions frequently include calls for harsh punishment, reflecting broader punitive sensibilities in contemporary public culture (Cohen, 1972; Garland, 2001).

Emotional expression plays a central role in these dynamics. Following the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), emotions such as anger, empathy, and frustration structure civic expression in digital spaces. In Bengkulu's hyperlocal context, emotional reactions are frequently accompanied by civic expectations, including demands for government intervention and accountability.

This framework positions audience comments as sites where trust, skepticism, media literacy, and affective response converge. Hyperlocal homeless media thus function not only as information channels but also as arenas of everyday civic negotiation.

Picture 1
Conceptual Diagram



METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to examine audience responses to hyperlocal homeless media on Instagram. The approach is suitable for identifying patterns of meaning, interpretation, and evaluative judgment expressed in user-generated comments (Krippendorff, 2018).

Data Source and Sampling

The data were collected from two community-managed Instagram accounts in Bengkulu: Bengkulu Info and Info Bengkulu Raya. Both accounts function as hyperlocal homeless media, operating without formal newsroom structures or professional editorial oversight.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied. From each account, ten posts were selected within the period September–November 2025, resulting in a total of twenty posts. The selection criteria included:

1. relevance to local social, criminal, and public service issues,
2. visibility in the form of audience engagement, and
3. representation of different issue categories.

From each post, five top-level audience comments were selected for analysis, resulting in a total corpus of 100 comments. Replies and comments consisting solely of emojis were excluded to ensure analytical consistency. The analysis focused on publicly visible comments that directly engaged with the content of the posts. All comments were collected manually and preserved in

their original linguistic form, including local dialects, colloquial language, emoticons, and variations in spelling.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed an inductive coding process. Comments were read repeatedly to identify recurring expressions, evaluative tones, and interpretive positions. Coding focused on how audiences assessed information credibility, institutional responsibility, and moral judgment.

Based on the research focus and empirical patterns, four main coding categories were developed:

1. Trust: expressions indicating acceptance, support, or reliance on the information or institutions mentioned.
2. Skepticism: doubts regarding accuracy, clarity, fairness, or institutional performance.
3. Correction: attempts to question, revise, or challenge the framing of the post.
4. Emotional and Moral Response: affective reactions such as anger, sarcasm, empathy, or condemnation.

This categorization draws conceptually on media literacy theory (Livingstone, 2014; Potter, 2004) and interpretive models of audience evaluation in digital environments.

Table 1. Coding Scheme for Audience Comment Analysis

No	Coding Category	Operational Definition	Examples of Indicators in Comments
1.	Issue Type	<i>The main topic of the post</i>	Crime, social issues, infrastructure, public services
2.	Comment Orientation	<i>General stance of the audience toward the post</i>	Supportive, critical, questioning, sarcastic
3.	Trust Expression	<i>Acceptance or confidence in information or institutions</i>	Agreement, endorsement, validation
4.	Audience Skepticism	<i>Doubt toward news content, authorities, or institutional performance</i>	Distrust, questioning credibility, blaming officials
5.	Corrective Response	<i>Attempts to clarify, correct, or add alternative explanations</i>	Factual corrections, suggestions, counter-arguments

6.	Emotional Tone	<i>Dominant emotion conveyed in the comment</i>	Anger, empathy, fear, ridicule, frustration
7.	Punitive Orientation	<i>Calls for harsh action or punishment</i>	Arrest demands, violence endorsement, severe sanctions
8.	Civic Expectation	<i>Appeals to responsibility or action by authorities</i>	Requests for policy action, accountability, intervention

Source: Researcher's Data, 2025

Validity and Reliability

To enhance analytical rigor, coding was conducted manually with constant comparison across posts and issues. Similar expressions were grouped to ensure internal consistency. The analysis prioritizes interpretive validity rather than statistical generalization, emphasizing meaning-making practices within a specific local context.

Ethical Considerations

All data were obtained from publicly accessible Instagram posts. Usernames were anonymized, and comments were treated as textual data rather than personal narratives. No interaction with account owners or commenters was conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed 20 Instagram posts (10 from Bengkulu Info and 10 from Info Bengkulu Raya) published between September–November 2025, along with 100 audience comments (five comments per post). The findings indicate that audience engagement with hyperlocal homeless media is shaped by issue type and reflects varying degrees of trust, skepticism, emotional response, and civic orientation.

Conditional Trust toward Hyperlocal Homeless Media

The results show that audiences continue to depend on hyperlocal homeless media as primary information sources, especially for crime incidents, accidents, and sudden social events. Across all 20 posts, none of the comment threads rejected the relevance of the information itself. This suggests a baseline level of functional trust.

However, this trust is conditional rather than absolute. In 7 out of 20 posts, at least one comment explicitly questioned the clarity, completeness, or framing of the information (e.g., “*berita tidak jelas*”, “*salah redaksi*”, “*ngantuk min?*”). These comments indicate that audiences accept the role of hyperlocal media while simultaneously scrutinizing its journalistic quality.

This pattern reflects trust as a pragmatic mechanism under uncertainty, where audiences rely on speed and proximity but remain vigilant toward accuracy.

Audience Skepticism as an Active Interpretive Practice

Audience skepticism appeared consistently across both accounts. From the 100 comments analyzed, approximately 38 comments expressed doubt, criticism, or questioning toward the post content, media framing, or institutional actors mentioned in the news.

Skepticism was most visible in:

- Posts sourced from government releases or mainstream media excerpts
- Posts with ambiguous captions or limited contextual explanation

Rather than disengaging, skeptical users actively evaluated the information, corrected perceived inaccuracies, or demanded clarification. This indicates that skepticism functions as a form of everyday media literacy, where audiences interpret content through local knowledge and lived experience in the group.

Dominance of Punitive Discourse in Crime-Related Issues

Crime-related posts triggered the strongest emotional and normative reactions. Out of 9 crime-focused posts, 8 posts contained at least three out of five comments advocating harsh punishment, physical violence, or long-term imprisonment.

In total, around 42% of comments on crime-related content employed punitive language such as:

“tembak di tempat” ; “kurung jangan dilepas” ; “bonyokkan” ; “jangan dibina”)

Rehabilitative or preventive perspectives were rare and often contested. This dominant punitive orientation suggests that audiences interpret crime through a moral framework emphasizing retribution and deterrence, particularly when incidents involve youth violence or repeated offenses.

Empathy and Political Blame in Social Welfare Issues

In contrast, posts addressing social welfare and public infrastructure generated empathetic responses combined with strong political critique. From 6 social welfare posts, over 70% of comments expressed sympathy toward victims (patients, workers, residents) while simultaneously assigning blame to political leaders or public institutions.

Common patterns included:

- Direct mentions of governors, mayors, or agencies
- Accusations of neglect, broken promises, or incompetence
- Appeals for immediate intervention

This indicates that empathy does not translate into institutional trust. Instead, emotional concern is often accompanied by delegitimization of authority, reflecting broader public dissatisfaction with governance and service delivery.

Comment Sections as Contested Public Arenas

Across all 20 posts, comment sections functioned as open arenas for negotiation of meaning and authority. Within the same thread, expressions of trust, skepticism, anger, humor, and moral judgment frequently coexisted.

From the dataset:

- No post showed a single dominant opinion without contestation
- At least 1–2 comments per post offered alternative interpretations, critiques, or counter-positions

This demonstrates that hyperlocal homeless media do not operate merely as information distributors but as interactive civic spaces, where public trust is continuously constructed, challenged, and revised.

Table 2. Relationship between Issue Type and Dominant Audience Orientation

Issue Category	Number of Posts	Dominant Audience Response	Typical Comment Orientation
Crime & Violence	9	<i>Punitive & emotional</i>	Calls for harsh punishment
Social Welfare & Infrastructure	6	<i>Empathetic & critical</i>	Sympathy + political blame
Policy & Regulation	3	<i>Skeptical & evaluative</i>	Questioning fairness, logic
Accidents/Incidents	2	<i>Mixed</i>	Concern + situational critique

Source: Researcher's Data, 2025

ANALYTICAL IMPLICATION

Taken together, the findings suggest that public trust in hyperlocal homeless media is not binary. Audiences rely on these platforms for immediacy and locality, yet actively question credibility, institutional

performance, and narrative framing. Skepticism, therefore, should be understood not as disengagement, but as a localized form of media literacy shaped by everyday social realities in Bengkulu.

CONCLUSION

This study examines audience interaction with hyperlocal homeless media on Instagram through an analysis of 20 posts and 100 comments from Bengkulu Info and Info Bengkulu Raya during the September–November 2025 period. The findings show that these accounts have become important local information nodes in Bengkulu, particularly for reporting crime incidents, infrastructure problems, and everyday social issues that are often underrepresented in mainstream media.

The analysis indicates that audiences in Bengkulu continue to rely on hyperlocal homeless media for immediate and geographically relevant information. However, this reliance is accompanied by continuous evaluation. Users frequently question unclear narratives, incomplete explanations, and institutional claims presented in the posts. Trust, therefore, operates in a practical manner and is closely tied to the perceived usefulness and credibility of each individual post, rather than to the media account as an institution.

Audience skepticism appears as a consistent feature of engagement and reflects local experience with governance, public services, and law enforcement. In crime-related posts, skepticism is often expressed through strong emotional reactions and punitive demands, suggesting frustration with repeated incidents and perceived weak enforcement. In contrast, social welfare and infrastructure-related posts tend to generate empathetic responses toward victims, combined with explicit criticism of political leaders and public agencies. These patterns highlight how public emotions and judgments are shaped by everyday encounters with structural problems in Bengkulu.

Overall, hyperlocal homeless media in Bengkulu function not merely as channels for disseminating information but as interactive public arenas where trust, criticism, and civic concerns are openly articulated. Comment sections serve as spaces where audiences negotiate meaning, express dissatisfaction, and articulate expectations toward authorities. In this context, audience skepticism should be understood as a form of locally grounded media literacy rather than as simple distrust of media content.

This study contributes to the broader discussion on media literacy and public trust by providing empirical evidence from a hyperlocal Indonesian context. Practically, the findings suggest that community-based Instagram accounts need to pay greater attention to narrative clarity, contextual depth, and ethical responsibility, especially when reporting sensitive issues. Future research may expand the scope by comparing different regions, platforms, or

production practices to further explore the role of hyperlocal homeless media in shaping local public discourse.

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