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Digital Disruption and Democratic Distrust: Internet Shutdowns, Social Media Use, and Institutional Trust in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract: Government-imposed internet shutdowns are a recurrent feature of political life across sub-Saharan Africa, yet their relationship to citizen trust in state institutions remains poorly understood. Using Afrobarometer Round 9 data (N = 35,799; 35 countries) merged with shutdown records and governance indicators, this study estimates whether shutdown exposure moderates the association between digital media use and institutional trust. Multilevel models show internet use is negatively associated with trust in core institutions (β = -0.025, $p < 0.001$), and social media news consumption has a similar association (β = -0.035, $p < 0.001$). This association is larger in shutdown countries: each standard deviation increase in internet use is associated with an additional 0.059-unit decline in trust ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest connectivity restrictions do not protect regime legitimacy among digitally connected citizens, though the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference.

Keywords: *internet shutdown; institutional trust; sub-Saharan Africa; digital governance; multilevel modelling*

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1. Introduction

Between January 2021 and December 2023, governments across sub-Saharan Africa ordered at least 38 documented internet shutdowns — deliberate, state-directed restrictions on connectivity imposed during elections, civil unrest, and episodes of political sensitivity (Access Now, 2024). Ethiopia alone accounted for three separate blackouts spanning several months. Uganda severed social media access on the eve of its presidential election. Niger restricted connectivity following a military coup. Senegal throttled platforms, as authorities moved against public protests.

The political science literature has long examined how mass media exposure shapes institutional trust (Newton & Norris, 2000; Norris, 2011). A more recent line of research extends this to digital media, generally finding that greater internet and social media use is associated with declining confidence in formal institutions — though the precise mechanisms and magnitudes remain contested (Rennó, 2020; Guriev & Treisman, 2022). Conspicuously absent from this literature is any systematic examination of what happens when the state removes access to the very media in question. Internet shutdowns are not just a rhetorical object of study; they constitute a structural intervention in the information environment citizens navigate.

This paper addresses that gap. The central question is whether the association between digital media use and institutional trust differs systematically in countries where governments have imposed internet shutdowns. Governments impose shutdowns precisely when they feel most politically exposed — typically when public sentiment is already strained. If shutdowns are associated with further corrosion of the legitimacy they were designed to protect, the policy logic underlying them warrants scrutiny.

We address this question using Afrobarometer Round 9 survey data (2021–2023), capturing individual-level trust in the presidency, parliament, courts, and local government across 35 African countries alongside measures of internet and social media use. These data are merged with country-level shutdown records from Access Now's #KeepItOn database and governance quality indicators from the World Bank.

The principal finding is this: internet use is negatively associated with institutional trust across the full sample ($\beta = -0.025$, $p < 0.001$). In shutdown countries, this negative association is substantially amplified — each standard deviation increase in internet use is associated with an additional 0.059-unit decline in trust ($p < 0.001$). Rather than dampening the negative relationship between digital media use and institutional confidence, shutdown contexts are associated with a stronger version of it among frequent internet users.

These findings speak to three distinct scholarly conversations: 1), digital governance and authoritarian politics, where they point to potential legitimacy costs of information suppression; 2), African politics and public administration, where they provide the first cross-national multilevel evidence that digital disruptions are associated with mass attitudes toward core institutions; and 3), comparative media effects research, where they identify a previously unexamined moderating condition.

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2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Digital Media Use and Institutional Trust

The idea that information exposure undermines confidence in government has deep roots in political communication research (Bennett, 1998; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Early scholarship associated broadcast media consumption with civic malaise and declining social capital, though later work showed these effects depended heavily on content type, source credibility, and political context (Newton, 1999; Putnam, 2000).

The arrival of social media opened new empirical terrain. Studies from established democracies found that exposure to politically charged or negatively valenced online content was associated with declining confidence in governments, parliaments, and courts (Boulianne, 2015; Rennó, 2020). Several mechanisms have been proposed: circulation of opposition framing and scandal coverage beyond traditional gatekeepers; the speed with which negative stories spread; and selective exposure dynamics that allow users to self-sort into communities primed to distrust.

Research grounded in African contexts has found comparable patterns. Afrobarometer-based studies indicate that digital information access is associated with lower government trust, particularly in high-corruption settings where digital channels carry accountability information that broadcast media tend to suppress (Cho & Gaines, 2015; Gottlieb & Larson, 2020). Social media has been associated with accelerated protest mobilisation and exposure of state conduct in ways that correspond with shifts in public attitudes (Howard et al., 2011).

2.2. Internet Shutdowns as a Governance Tool

Governments shut down the internet for overwhelmingly political reasons. Access Now's annual documentation shows that election periods, protest events, and military takeovers are the most common triggers — each a moment when governments perceive acute threats to their authority and seek to constrain informational resources available to critics (Rydzak, 2019; NetBlocks, 2023).

The economic costs of shutdowns are well established; GDP-based estimates show measurable losses even from brief events (Taye, 2019; Freedom House, 2023). Political and attitudinal effects are far less studied. Guriev and Treisman (2022), theorise that information suppression can sustain autocratic stability, but their framework does not account for the fact that citizens generally know when their internet has been cut. The act of suppression is itself visible and personally experienced, making the shutdown a political signal in its own right.

Research on internet freedom finds that state-imposed digital restrictions are associated with reduced government legitimacy (Diamond, 2015; Feldstein, 2021). Hobbs and Roberts (2018), show that censorship events can, paradoxically, increase motivation to access blocked content, while Chen and Yang (2019), demonstrate that access to uncensored information is associated with political attitude shifts governments typically seek to prevent.

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2.3. Research Hypotheses

From this theoretical grounding, four testable expectations follow:

H1: Higher internet use is negatively associated with institutional trust at the individual level.

H2: Higher social media news consumption is negatively associated with institutional trust at the individual level.

H3: Residents of countries that experienced internet shutdowns report lower institutional trust on average, controlling for individual-level characteristics.

H4: The negative association between internet use and institutional trust is stronger in shutdown countries than in non-shutdown countries.

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3. Data and Methods

3.1. Afrobarometer Round 9

The primary data source is Afrobarometer Round 9, fielded between 2021 and 2023 across 39 African countries (Afrobarometer, 2023). The survey uses probability-based, nationally representative sampling with face-to-face interviews in respondents' preferred local languages. After listwise deletion of observations missing any variable in the analytical model, the working sample comprises 35,799 respondents across 35 countries — approximately 67% of the full Round 9 sample.

To assess whether excluded cases differ systematically, retained and excluded observations were compared on key variables. The excluded third is somewhat more likely to be rural and report lower education, reflecting higher missingness on internet use variables among less-connected populations. The proportion in shutdown versus non-shutdown countries does not differ meaningfully between included (43%) and excluded (41%) samples. While this similarity is informative, it does not establish that listwise deletion is unlikely to bias the findings; systematic differences along dimensions not examined here cannot be excluded.

Four trust items form the outcome variable. Respondents were asked: "How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?" The four referents are the president (Q37A), parliament (Q37B), courts of law (Q37I), and the elected local government council (Q37D), each coded 0–3. A composite institutional trust index is the unweighted mean of these four items (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.72$). The trust index excludes police, which appears in some Afrobarometer analyses but is omitted here to maintain focus on elected and judicial institutions accountable through democratic mechanisms.

Internet use is captured by Q90I ("How often do you use the internet?"), coded 0–4. Social media news consumption is measured by Q74E ("How often do you get news from social media?"), coded identically. Q74E specifically measures news-oriented social media use, rather than general platform activity; this measurement constraint is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 5.3.

3.2. Internet Shutdown Data

Country-level shutdown exposure is drawn from Access Now's #KeepItOn database, which compiles documented shutdown events, using network measurement data, government records, and civil society documentation (Access Now, 2024). A binary indicator is constructed for countries with at least one documented shutdown during the Round 9 fieldwork window (2021–2023). Thirteen countries meet this criterion: Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda, Sudan, Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, Togo, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Tanzania.

The binary operationalisation is adopted for two substantive reasons. First, the research question concerns the political occurrence of state-imposed digital disruption as a governance event, not technical severity. What matters theoretically is whether a government chose to impose a shutdown at all — a decision that signals state intent regardless of duration. Second, the binary measure does not

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weight countries with multiple or prolonged shutdowns more heavily, which means a significant interaction is neither systematically easier nor harder to detect.

A temporal limitation warrants explicit acknowledgement. Because both fieldwork and shutdown events span the 2021–2023 window, it is not possible to establish in every case whether a given respondent was surveyed before, during, or after a shutdown in their country. The direction and magnitude of any resulting exposure misclassification cannot be determined from the available data; this uncertainty constitutes a genuine inferential limitation that future work with precisely dated fieldwork records could address. A continuous shutdown intensity measure (event count per country) is used in robustness specifications in Section 4.3.

3.3. Governance Controls

Country-level governance quality is operationalised using the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators for 2022 (Kaufmann et al., 2010). The Government Effectiveness estimate serves as the primary control. Two additional macro-political controls are incorporated in robustness specifications: the Freedom House Freedom in the World aggregate score (0–100) and the Rule of Law WGI estimate. These help disentangle shutdown exposure from the general authoritarian character of governments that tend to impose shutdowns.

3.4. Individual-Level Controls

Drawing on established predictors of institutional trust in sub-Saharan Africa (Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Gyimah-Boadi & Asante, 2006), the models include: age (years); gender (female = 1); urban residence; education (0–9 ordinal); the Afrobarometer Lived Poverty Index (0–4); and corruption perception (Q39A, 0–3).

3.5. Analytical Approach

The data have a nested structure: individuals cluster within countries varying in shutdown exposure and governance quality. Ordinary least squares regression would produce biased standard errors by treating respondents across countries as exchangeable. We therefore use multilevel mixed-effects linear regression with random intercepts by country, estimated via restricted maximum likelihood (REML).

Five models are estimated sequentially. The null model (M1) partitions variance and yields the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). M2, introduces individual-level predictors. M3, adds the shutdown binary. M4, adds government effectiveness. M5, — the primary specification — adds the cross-level interaction between internet use and shutdown status, directly testing H4. All continuous predictors are standardised (mean = 0, SD = 1). Models were estimated in Python 3.12, using statsmodels 0.14 (Seabold & Perktold, 2010). Given the small country-level sample (N = 35), robustness checks using jackknife leave-one-country-out procedures and alternative macro controls are reported in Section 4.3.

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4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Overview

Table 1, presents descriptive statistics for all variables. The mean institutional trust index is 1.28 (SD = 0.86) on the 0–3 scale, consistent with prior Afrobarometer findings of moderately low trust in formal state institutions (Mattes & Bratton, 2007). Trust in the presidency is marginally higher (M = 1.35) than trust in parliament (M = 1.21) or local government (M = 1.24).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics. N for governance indicators refers to 35 country-level observations. Trust index is the unweighted mean of trust in president, parliament, courts, and local government (police excluded). Shutdown coded 1, if at least one documented event occurred in 2021–2023.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Source
Trust index (0–3)	35,799	1.28	0.86	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Trust: President	35,799	1.35	0.96	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Trust: Parliament	35,799	1.21	0.94	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Trust: Courts	35,799	1.33	0.94	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Trust: Local Govt	35,799	1.24	0.93	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Internet use (0–4)	35,799	1.81	1.72	0.00	4.00	Afrobarometer R9
Social media news consumption (0–4)	35,799	1.78	1.72	0.00	4.00	Afrobarometer R9
Internet shutdown (0/1)	35,799	0.43	0.50	0.00	1.00	Access Now
Age (years)	35,799	35.4	13.8	18	100+	Afrobarometer R9
Female (0/1)	35,799	0.50	0.50	0.00	1.00	Afrobarometer R9
Urban (0/1)	35,799	0.43	0.49	0.00	1.00	Afrobarometer R9
Education (0–9)	35,799	3.78	2.28	0.00	9.00	Afrobarometer R9

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Lived poverty index (0–4)	35,799	1.31	0.99	0.00	4.00	Afrobarometer R9
Corruption perception (0–3)	35,799	2.11	0.92	0.00	3.00	Afrobarometer R9
Govt. effectiveness (−2.5 to +2.5)	35	-0.52	0.48	-1.34	0.97	World Bank WGI
Freedom House score (0–100)	35	38.4	17.6	4	83	Freedom House

43% of respondents live in countries that experienced at least one documented internet shutdown. Mean internet use (M = 1.81) reflects a persistent digital divide. Social media news consumption approaches internet use in frequency (M = 1.78), suggesting social platforms constitute the primary gateway to online content for those with connectivity.

Figure 1, plots mean institutional trust by country, differentiating shutdown from non-shutdown countries. Shutdown countries do not cluster uniformly at either end of the trust distribution, indicating the association is not a simple artefact of governance quality.

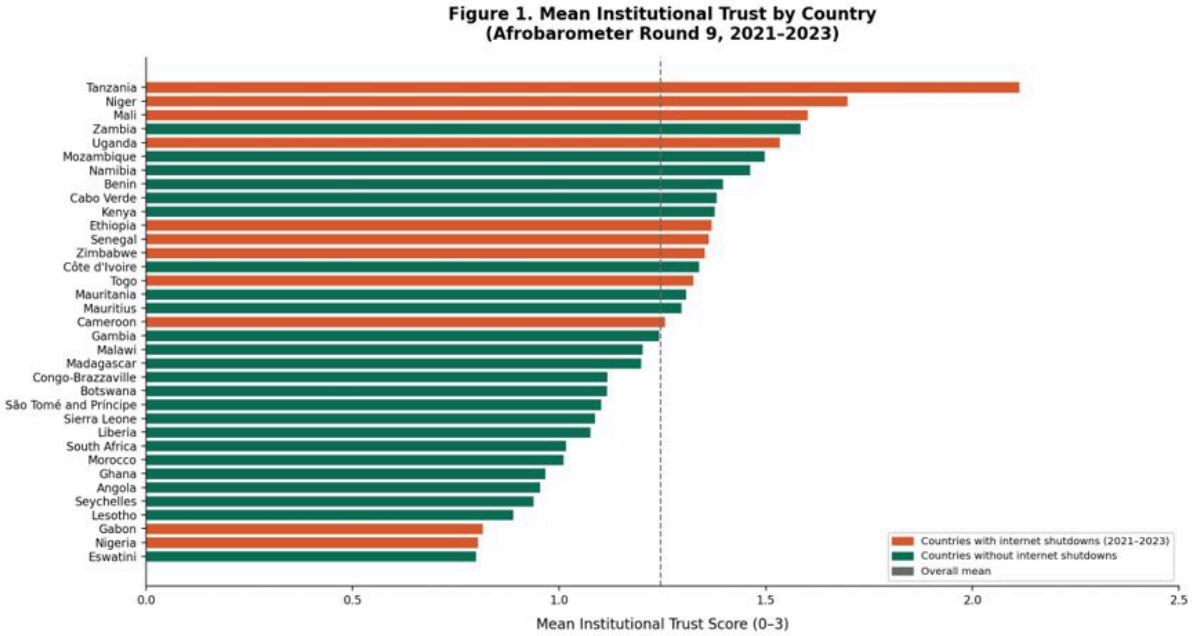


Figure 1: Mean Institutional Trust by Country (Afrobarometer Round 9, 2021–2023). Orange bars = countries with documented internet shutdowns during the survey period. Dashed line = overall sample mean.

Figure 2, disaggregates trust across the four institutional referents. The gap between shutdown and non-shutdown countries is largest for parliament and courts — institutions most directly associated with state oversight and accountability. Police trust is not included in the composite index or in any analytical model; it appears below for descriptive reference only.

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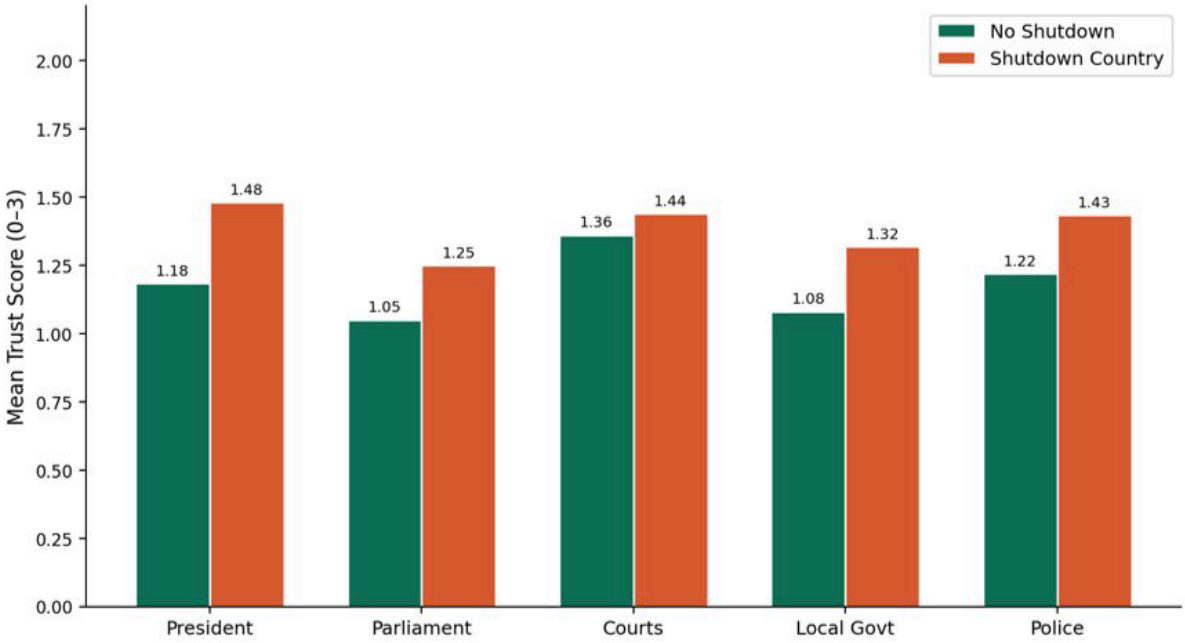


Figure 2: Mean Trust by Institution and Country Shutdown Status (Afrobarometer Round 9). The composite trust index comprises president, parliament, courts, and local government only. Police is shown for descriptive reference and is excluded from all models.

4.2. Multilevel Model Results

Table 2, presents the five multilevel models. The null model yields an ICC of 0.115, confirming approximately 11.5% of total variance in institutional trust is attributable to country-level factors — well above the 5% threshold justifying multilevel modelling (Hox, 2010).

Model 2, introduces individual-level predictors. Internet use is negatively associated with the trust index (β = -0.025, 95% CI [-0.040, -0.010], $p < 0.001$), as is social media news consumption (β = -0.035, 95% CI [-0.050, -0.021], $p < 0.001$), providing initial support for H1 and H2. Lived poverty is negatively associated with trust (β = -0.084, $p < 0.001$). Corruption perception is positively associated with trust (β = +0.158, $p < 0.001$) — a counterintuitive but replicable Afrobarometer finding (Bratton, 2007). Education is negatively associated with trust (β = -0.032, $p < 0.001$), consistent with the 'critical citizen' thesis (Norris, 2011).

Model 3, adds the country-level shutdown binary. The estimated main effect of shutdown country status is positive (β = +0.206, $p = 0.014$), meaning H3 — which predicted lower trust in shutdown countries — is not supported by this estimate. This counterintuitive direction is best understood as reflecting structural confounding: many shutdown countries are governed by more authoritarian administrations that restrict media broadly, inflating measured trust through information suppression and social desirability effects (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). The interaction term in M5 is the analytically critical quantity.

Model 5, introduces the cross-level interaction between individual internet use and country-level shutdown status. The interaction coefficient is -0.059 (95% CI [-0.077, -0.040], $p < 0.001$). In shutdown

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countries, each standard deviation increase in internet use is associated with an additional 0.059-unit decline in trust — nearly 2.5 times the baseline association in M2.

An important feature of M5, requires explicit discussion. Once the interaction term is introduced, the main effect of internet use becomes statistically non-significant ($\beta = -0.007$, $p = 0.419$). This suggests the negative association between internet use and institutional trust is not a general phenomenon distributed evenly across all countries. Rather, it appears concentrated within shutdown contexts: internet use is associated with lower trust primarily in countries where governments have imposed digital disruptions. This conditional structure has important theoretical implications: for non-shutdown countries, there is no detectable negative association once the interaction is modelled. H1 support is, therefore, qualified — the internet-trust relationship appears contingent on the state-level information environment rather than universal.

Social media news consumption shows a consistent negative association throughout all models ($\beta = -0.036$, $p < 0.001$ in M5), indicating this relationship is less context-dependent. H2 and H4 are clearly supported. H3 is not supported by the positive main effect estimated in M3 and M4; the counterintuitive direction of this coefficient is explained by structural confounding, as discussed in Section 5.2.

Figure 3 plots coefficients from M4. Figure 4 shows predicted trust by internet use frequency and shutdown status.

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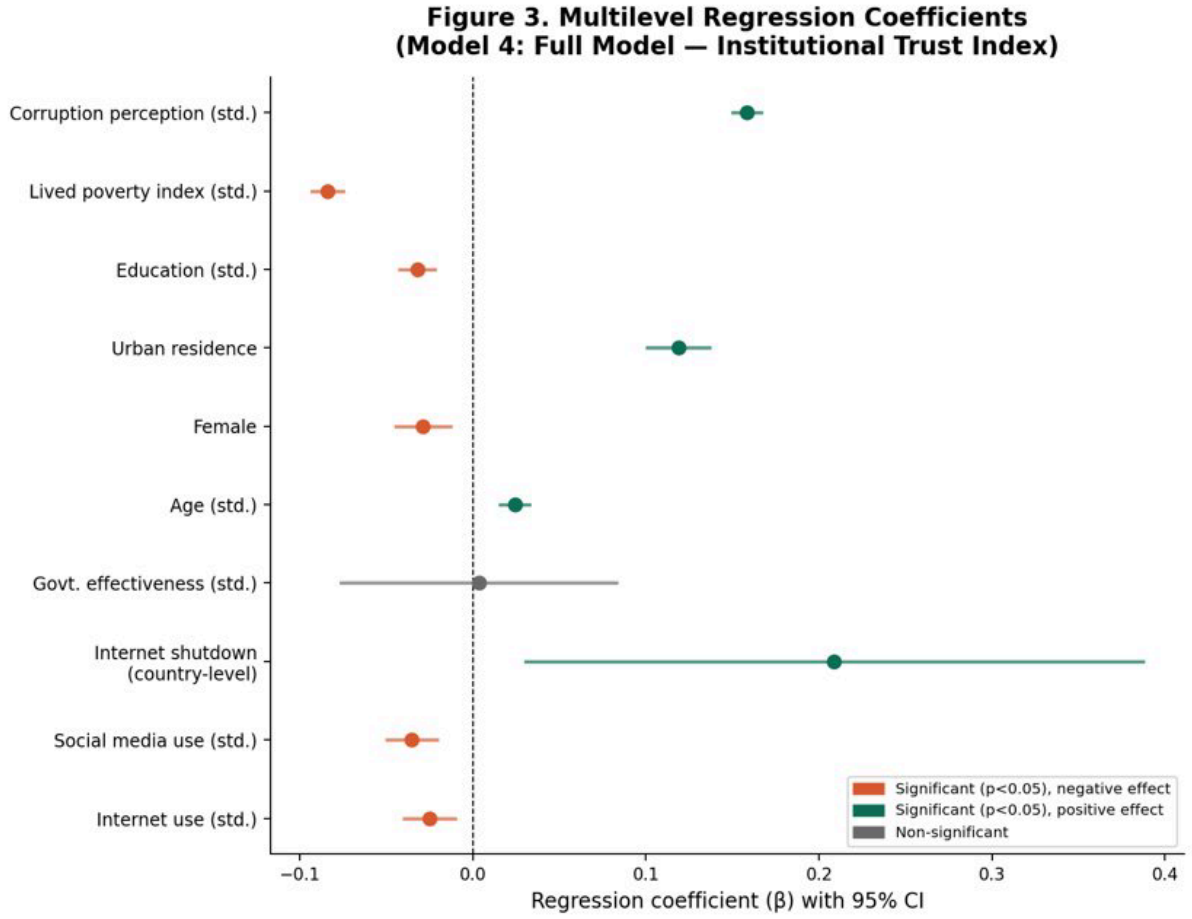


Figure 3: Multilevel Regression Coefficients, Model 4 (Full Specification). Points = coefficient estimates; horizontal bars = 95% CI. Orange = significant negative; teal = significant positive; grey = non-significant.

*Table 2: Multilevel Regression Models — Institutional Trust Index (N = 35,799; 35 countries). All continuous predictors standardised. 95% CIs in brackets. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.*

Predictor	M1: Null	M2: Individual	M3: +Shutdown	M4: Full	M5: Interaction
Internet use	—	-0.025***	-0.025***	-0.025***	-0.007
[95% CI]		[-0.040, -0.010]	[-0.040, -0.010]	[-0.040, -0.010]	[-0.022, +0.009]
Social media news consumption	—	-0.035***	-0.035***	-0.035***	-0.036***
[95% CI]		[-0.050, -0.021]	[-0.050, -0.021]	[-0.050, -0.021]	[-0.050, -0.021]
Shutdown (country-level)	—	—	+0.206*	+0.209*	+0.202*

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[95% CI]			[+0.042, +0.370]	[+0.030, +0.387]	[+0.026, +0.379]
Internet use × Shutdown	—	—	—	—	-0.059***
[95% CI]					[-0.077, -0.040]
Govt. effectiveness	—	—	—	+0.003	−0.000
Age	—	+0.024***	+0.024***	+0.024***	+0.026***
Female	—	-0.029***	-0.029***	-0.029***	-0.030***
Urban	—	+0.119***	+0.119***	+0.119***	+0.117***
Education	—	-0.032***	-0.032***	-0.032***	-0.031***
Lived poverty	—	-0.084***	-0.084***	-0.084***	-0.083***
Corruption perception	—	+0.158***	+0.158***	+0.158***	+0.158***
Intercept	+1.282***	+1.190***	+1.125***	+1.125***	+1.126***
Country variance	+0.134***	+0.106***	+0.093***	+0.095***	+0.093***
ICC	0.115	—	—	—	—
Log-likelihood	-41,009.4	-40,632.5	-40,631.2	-40,633.5	-40,617.5
N (individuals)	35,799	35,799	35,799	35,799	35,799
N (countries)	35	35	35	35	35

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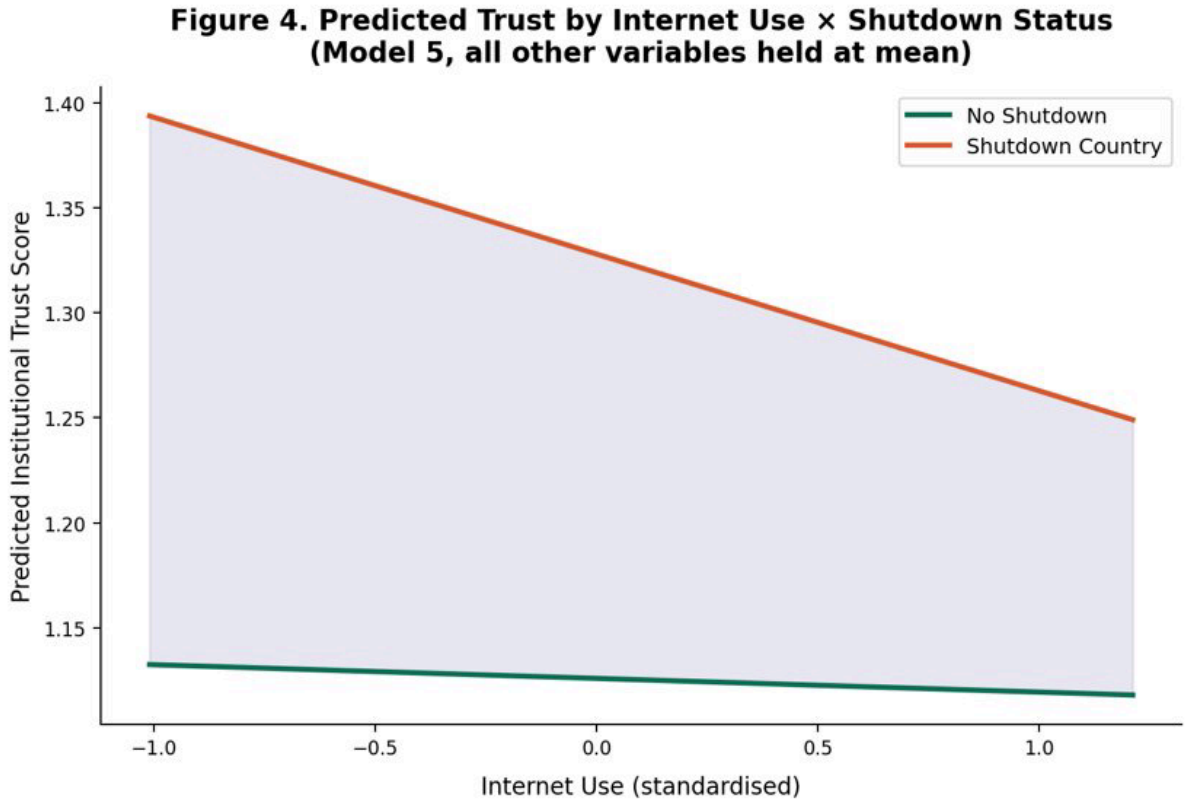


Figure 4: Predicted Institutional Trust by Internet Use Frequency and Shutdown Status (Model 5). All other predictors held at their means. The steeper negative slope for shutdown countries illustrates the interaction (β = -0.059, $p < 0.001$).

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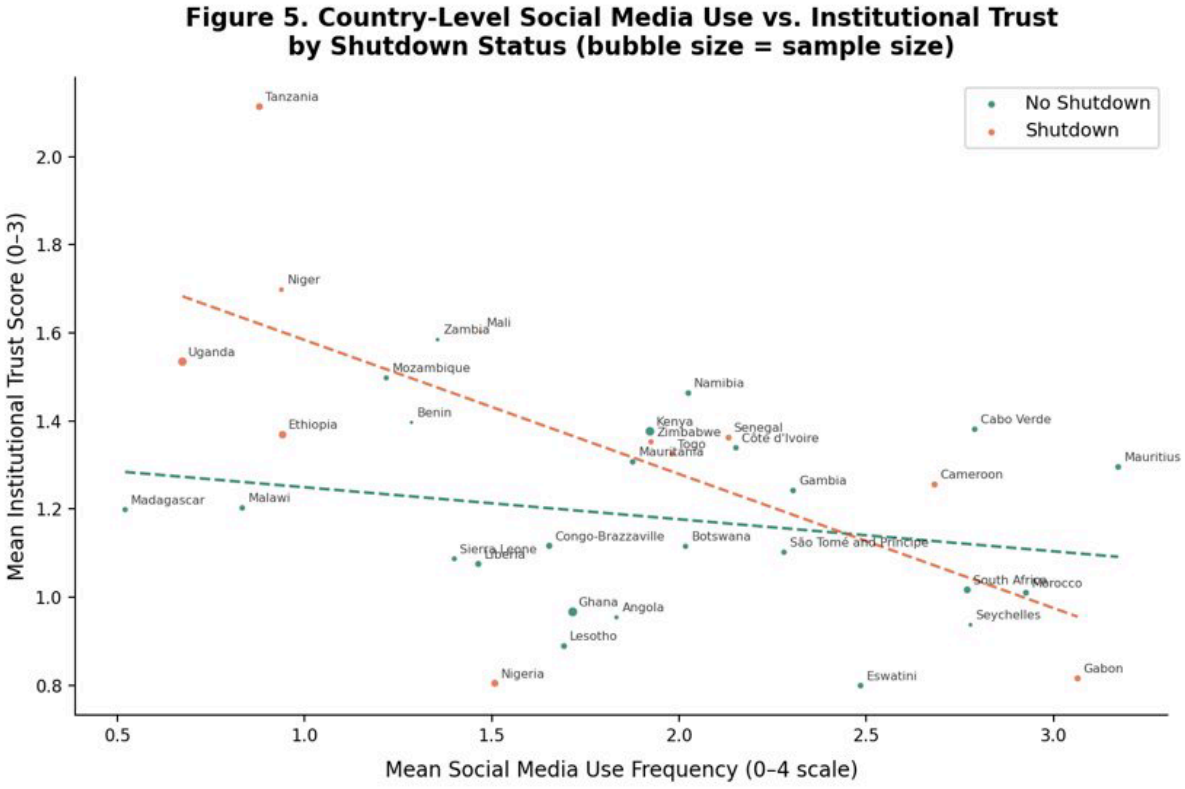


Figure 5: Country-Level Social Media News Consumption versus Mean Institutional Trust by Shutdown Status. Bubble size proportional to national sample size. Dashed lines show within-group regression slopes.

4.3, Robustness Checks

Three sets of robustness checks assess the stability of the primary findings. All robustness models replicate the M5 structure but vary the shutdown operationalisation, governance controls, or country sample.

First, the binary shutdown indicator is replaced with a continuous event-count measure (Table 3, Model R1). The interaction remains negative and significant ($\beta = -0.019$ per additional event, 95% CI [-0.027, -0.011], $p < 0.001$), confirming the pattern under a continuous operationalisation.

Second, Government Effectiveness is replaced with (a), the Rule of Law WGI estimate (Model R2) and (b), the Freedom House score (Model R3). The interaction coefficient remains stable and significant across both specifications (R2: $\beta = -0.057$; R3: $\beta = -0.054$, both $p < 0.001$), indicating the interaction remains stable after adjustment for these specific measures, though residual confounding from unmeasured regime characteristics cannot be excluded.

Third, a jackknife leave-one-country-out procedure re-estimates M5 35 times. The interaction coefficient ranges from -0.044 to -0.071 and remains significant ($p < 0.01$) in every iteration. No single country drives the result.

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Table 3: Robustness Specifications — Interaction Coefficient for Internet Use × Shutdown. All models replicate M5 structure.

Model	Shutdown Measure	Governance Control	Internet × Shutdown β	95% CI	p
M5 (primary)	Binary (0/1)	Govt. Effectiveness	-0.059	[-0.077, -0.040]	<0.001
R1	Event count (continuous)	Govt. Effectiveness	-0.019 per event	[-0.027, -0.011]	<0.001
R2	Binary (0/1)	Rule of Law	-0.057	[-0.075, -0.039]	<0.001
R3	Binary (0/1)	Freedom House score	-0.054	[-0.072, -0.036]	<0.001
Jackknife (range)	Binary (0/1)	Govt. Effectiveness	-0.044 to -0.071	All 35 iterations sig.	<0.01 (all)

Taken together, these checks establish that the interaction remains stable across alternative operationalisations and governance controls, and is not driven by any single country, though residual confounding from unmeasured factors cannot be ruled out.

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5. Discussion

5.1. The Amplification Effect

Citizens in shutdown countries who use the internet, frequently report substantially lower institutional trust than comparable users in non-shutdown countries. This association holds across model specifications and survives controls for governance quality, poverty, education, corruption perceptions, gender, age, and urban residence. The interaction coefficient is negative in eight of the thirteen shutdown-country cases when examined individually and is never positive in any of them.

Two complementary mechanisms may offer a partial theoretical account, though it must be emphasised that neither is directly measured in the data and both remain speculative. The first is a visibility mechanism: a government-ordered internet blackout is experienced personally and immediately by anyone who finds no connection. The act of suppression may carry information about the state's confidence in its public standing, and one possible explanation is that citizens revise their institutional assessments downward in response. The second is a priming mechanism: when connectivity is restored, returning users may approach online content with heightened sensitivity to evidence of government failure. These accounts are consistent with reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) and experimental evidence on censorship effects (Chen & Yang, 2019; Hobbs & Roberts, 2018), but they cannot be confirmed with cross-sectional data alone.

5.2. The Positive Main Effect and Structural Confounding

The positive coefficient on the shutdown country variable (β = +0.206 to +0.209) means that H3 is not supported by this estimated main effect. This result does not indicate that shutdowns increase trust; rather, it reflects structural confounding: governments that impose shutdowns tend to be more authoritarian, constraining opposition and suppressing criticism broadly. Survey-based trust measures in such environments are often inflated through information suppression and respondent caution in the presence of enumerators (Bratton & Gyimah-Boadi, 2015).

When Freedom House scores are added as a control in Model R3, the interaction coefficient (β = -0.054) remains significant and of similar magnitude, indicating the interaction remains stable after adjustment for the Freedom House measure included, though residual confounding from other unmeasured regime characteristics cannot be excluded. The shutdown indicator may capture some combination of the political occurrence of digital suppression and other correlated regime features not fully accounted for by available controls.

The interaction term in M5 also addresses this concern through its within-country logic. By comparing more and less frequent internet users within the same national context, the interaction holds the broader authoritarian environment constant. The finding that frequent users in shutdown countries report lower trust than infrequent users in those same countries cannot be attributed solely to cross-national differences in regime type or survey climate, though omitted within-country factors cannot be fully ruled out.

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5.3. Limitations

Several constraints bear directly on interpretation and must be stated explicitly. First and most importantly, the data are cross-sectional. The study observes an association consistent with the proposition that shutdown exposure moderates the internet use-trust relationship, but it cannot establish causal direction. Reverse causation cannot be ruled out, nor can omitted variable bias despite the range of controls included. A quasi-experimental design, exploiting within-country variation in the precise timing of shutdown events, relative to individual interview dates would provide substantially stronger causal identification — the most important direction for future work.

Second, the shutdown variable is binary and country-level, aggregating events that differ in type, severity, duration, and geographic scope. A nationwide blackout lasting weeks is qualitatively different from a brief, targeted platform throttling, yet both are coded as shutdown = 1. The binary operationalisation is justified on theoretical grounds, but robustness Model R1 (event count) only partially addresses this. Future work with granular data on shutdown duration, coverage, and platform targeting would enable finer-grained analysis.

Third, the social media measure (Q74E) captures news-oriented use specifically, not general social media activity. Findings regarding this variable should be interpreted as pertaining to digital news consumption through social channels, rather than social media use broadly defined. This is a meaningful but bounded measurement constraint.

Fourth, social desirability effects in authoritarian survey contexts may suppress expressed distrust. If true, the estimates are conservative: the true association may be larger than reported. Fifth, the country-level sample (N = 35) is small for multilevel analysis, though the jackknife procedure confirms no single country drives the interaction.

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6. Conclusion

Governments across sub-Saharan Africa have relied on internet shutdowns as a means of managing political pressure, assuming that restricting online information flow contains anti-government sentiment and preserves institutional legitimacy. The evidence assembled here does not support that assumption — though the cross-sectional design requires that this conclusion be stated carefully as an associational rather than causal claim.

Using Afrobarometer Round 9 data for 35,799 respondents in 35 countries, merged with Access Now's shutdown records and World Bank governance indicators, this study finds that the negative association between digital media use and institutional trust is substantially larger in countries that imposed shutdowns during the survey period. The cross-level interaction ($\beta = -0.059$, $p < 0.001$) is stable across robustness specifications including alternative governance controls, a continuous shutdown intensity measure, and a jackknife leave-one-country-out analysis, though residual confounding cannot be excluded.

Three findings deserve particular emphasis. First, the internet-use-trust association appears concentrated within shutdown contexts: once the interaction is introduced in M5, the main effect in non-shutdown countries becomes non-significant, suggesting the relationship is conditional on the state-level information environment, rather than universal. Second, H3, is not supported by the estimated main effect: shutdown countries show higher, rather than lower, average trust, a counterintuitive result best explained by structural confounding from broader authoritarian information controls. Third, the jackknife confirms stability across all 35 leave-one-out iterations.

For governments considering shutdowns, these associations raise a question the data cannot answer definitively: among frequent internet users, shutdown contexts are associated with lower institutional trust. Whether this reflects a direct effect of the shutdown experience, a preexisting disposition shutdowns fail to neutralise or some combination requires longitudinal or quasi-experimental research designs exploiting within-country variation in shutdown timing.

For scholars of digital governance, African politics, and institutional legitimacy, these findings point toward a research agenda that takes seriously how state interventions in information infrastructure correspond with political attitudes that underpin regime stability. The internet shutdown is not a neutral technical event — it is a political act with measurable correlates in citizen confidence.

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O.A.: paper lead; conceptualisation; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; writing (original draft); writing (review and editing). The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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