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UNIVERSITY STUDENT COUNCIL TRANSPARENCY AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AS PREDICTORS OF TRUST

***Reymond C. Dalupang**
Mary Jane B. Mislang
King Christian D. Antonio
Jayson S. Nacorda
University of La Salette, Inc., Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines
**rdalupang@uls.edu.ph*

ABSTRACT

Student councils provide a formal channel for representation, but participation may depend on whether students understand council actions and trust their representatives. This cross-sectional study with mediation analysis examined council transparency, digital communication, student trust, and participation in one Philippine university with nine undergraduate colleges. Data were collected from February to May 2026 using a researcher-developed questionnaire with item domains adapted from established transparency and organizational trust frameworks. After screening, 565 valid responses were retained, exceeding the proportionately stratified target of 400. Analyses were conducted in Python 3.13 using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Welch ANOVA and t-tests, Pearson correlation, ordinary least squares regression, and a 5,000-resample bootstrap mediation corresponding to Hayes' Model 4. Mean ratings were above the midpoint for transparency ($M = 3.76$), digital transparency ($M = 3.84$), trust ($M = 3.78$), and participation ($M = 3.50$), with no significant college-level differences. Transparency predicted trust ($\beta = .767$, $p < .001$) and participation ($\beta = .463$, $p < .001$). Trust predicted participation after transparency was controlled ($\beta = .471$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect through trust was significant ($b = .379$, 95% CI [0.280, 0.472]), whereas the direct effect was not ($p = .064$). Student trust therefore significantly mediated the transparency-participation relationship.

Keywords: *Student councils, transparency, digital communication, student trust, student participation.*

INTRODUCTION

Student representation is a routine part of university life, but the existence of a council does not automatically mean that students feel represented. Student councils are expected to communicate concerns, explain decisions, organize activities, and carry student views into institutional discussions. Recent higher education research makes an important distinction here: representation gives elected students a formal mandate to speak for their peers, while partnership involves students working directly with staff and institutional actors (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Both forms matter, yet each depends on whether ordinary students can see what their representatives are doing and whether they believe participation can lead to a meaningful response. This makes transparency, trust, and participation closely connected concerns rather than separate features of student governance.

Student Representation and Meaningful Participation

Recent scholarship treats student voice as more than being invited to meetings or asked to complete a survey. Kennedy and Pek (2023) argue that meaningful participation in university governance requires processes that are inclusive, authentic, and consequential. In the same way, Matthews and Dollinger

(2023) caution that elected representation should not be confused with staff-selected partnership arrangements because the basis of responsibility and access is different. For student councils, this means that legitimacy is partly built through ordinary practices: students need to know who speaks for them, what concerns were raised, what decisions were reached, and what happened afterward.

The response after participation is crucial. When students answer consultations but receive no follow-up, participation can feel symbolic. Palma et al. (2023) link participation problems to unclear roles and weak communication, while Enim et al. (2024) emphasize opportunities for genuine influence. Mendes and Hammett (2023) similarly warn that student voice can become procedural when participation has few visible consequences. These concerns support examining participation together with communication quality and trust.

Transparency as an Information Quality Practice

Transparency gives students a basis for judging both decisions and the people making them. The concept is therefore broader than simply making information public. Recent communication research continues to show that transparent messages are associated with stronger trust and more favorable behavioral responses. Abitbol et al. (2022), for example, found that perceived communication transparency was positively related to trust and behavioral intentions, while Zheng (2023) showed experimentally that accountability, substantive information, and opportunities for participation can help rebuild public trust. Although these studies were conducted outside student councils, they support the same underlying idea: information becomes useful for trust when it is sufficiently open, understandable, and responsive to the audience.

Schnackenberg et al. (2021) describe organizational transparency through disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. These dimensions provide the main transparency framework for the present study. Disclosure concerns whether relevant council plans, decisions, activities, and outcomes are actually shared. Clarity concerns whether students can understand the information without needing access to internal council discussions. Accuracy concerns whether the information reflects what occurred. In the present context, timing is also important because an announcement that arrives too late may technically be public but no longer useful for participation.

In student councils, these dimensions appear in routine practices: timely announcements, identifiable official channels, clear explanations of decisions, and updates after events or consultations. Ruppel et al. (2022) found that organizational transparency can reduce uncertainty, which is relevant when students have limited access to the council's internal work. Clear, traceable communication can narrow the information gap between officers and the wider student body.

Digital Communication as Transparency Infrastructure

Digital channels have become part of the everyday infrastructure of student communication. In the Philippine setting, Facebook pages, Messenger group chats, and similar platforms are commonly used to distribute academic and organizational information (Flejoles, 2023; Lorenzana, 2021). These tools make announcements easier to circulate, but visibility is not the same as transparency. Information can still become fragmented across posts, group chats, and temporary messages, making it difficult for students to trace what was decided or whether an issue was resolved.

The study therefore treats digital communication as part of transparency rather than a substitute for it. A useful digital channel should help students locate decisions, follow updates, and see what happened after consultations or activities. This distinction matters because online access can coexist with information overload or fragmented records (Ruppel et al., 2022). The issue is not simply whether councils post online, but whether their digital practices create an understandable public record.

Theoretical Underpinning: Trust as the Mediating Mechanism

The mediation model is anchored in organizational trust theory. Mayer et al. (1995) explain trust as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on judgments of another party's ability, integrity, and benevolence. In a student council setting, students cannot directly observe every meeting, negotiation,

or decision. They therefore rely on visible communication to judge whether representatives are competent, honest, consistent, and concerned with student interests. Transparent communication provides evidence for those judgments. More recent work also supports the link between transparency and trust (Abitbol et al., 2022; Zheng, 2023), while Lo (2025) shows that trust remains central to shared governance when student participation and institutional decision-making interact.

This theoretical sequence explains why trust is positioned as a mediator rather than only as another outcome. Transparency may first shape how students evaluate the council; those evaluations may then affect whether students are willing to vote, attend consultations, volunteer, give feedback, or join council activities. The proposed model therefore follows a transparency-to-trust-to-participation pathway, while still testing whether transparency has a direct relationship with participation after trust is considered.

The Philippine Higher Education Context

Student participation in Philippine higher education is supported by policies on student affairs, recognized organizations, and institutional involvement (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2006, 2013). These older policy foundations remain relevant to the formal role of student organizations. Inclusive decision-making also connects with Sustainable Development Goal 16.7, while inclusive leadership relates to SDG 5.5 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022; Philippine Commission on Women, 2022). In practice, these goals are reflected in how councils inform students, gather views, and report their responses.

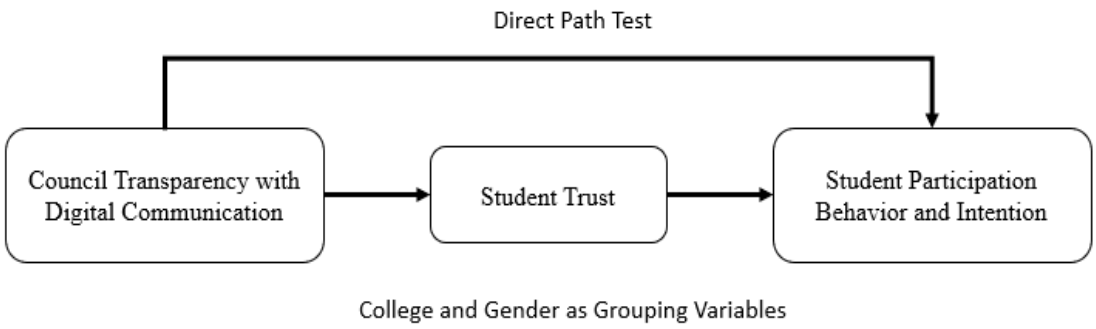
Research Gap, Contribution, and Study Questions

Recent research strengthens the case for student voice and meaningful participation in university governance (Enim et al., 2024; Kennedy & Pek, 2023; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). It also warns that participation can become superficial when students are consulted without clear evidence that their input matters (Mendes & Hammett, 2023). Less is known about how everyday student-council transparency relates to participation through trust, particularly in Philippine higher education. Digital communication is also commonly treated as an announcement channel rather than as part of a broader transparency process.

This study addresses the gap by testing a mediation model within one university containing nine undergraduate colleges. The shared institutional environment permits comparisons across academic units while limiting the larger differences that occur in multi-university studies. The study separates general council transparency from digital transparency and tests trust as the mechanism linking transparency with participation. Four questions guided the analysis: (1) What are the reported levels of council transparency, digital transparency, student trust, and participation? (2) Do these ratings differ across colleges and gender groups? (3) Does council transparency predict student trust and participation? (4) Does student trust mediate the transparency-participation relationship? The proposed model expected a significant indirect effect through trust.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of the Study



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative cross-sectional design with mediation analysis was used. The descriptive and comparative components examined transparency, digital transparency, trust, and participation at one point in time and compared these measures across college and gender groups. The predictive component tested the proposed transparency-trust-participation pathway. The mediation structure corresponds to Hayes' (2018) simple mediation Model 4, with council transparency as the predictor (X), student trust as the mediator (M), and student participation as the outcome (Y). The model estimated the total effect of transparency on participation, the transparency-to-trust path, the trust-to-participation path while controlling for transparency, the direct effect of transparency after trust was included, and the bootstrapped indirect effect through trust.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at a private university in Northern Luzon, Philippines. The undergraduate sampling population covered nine colleges and consisted of approximately 5,800 students. The setting was appropriate because the colleges share the same institutional policies and student-affairs structure but have distinct student groups and council communication practices, allowing comparisons across academic units without the broader differences of a multi-university design. Eligible participants were currently enrolled undergraduates from the nine colleges who gave informed consent and completed the required core questionnaire items. Responses were excluded if they were outside the target population, lacked consent or required core items, or belonged to the separate pilot test. The analysis of digital-transparency items was for students who followed or checked an official council online channel.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sampling target used a finite-population proportion approach. Based on an undergraduate population of approximately 5,800 students, a 95% confidence level, 5% margin of error, and $p = .50$, Cochran's large-population estimate was about 384, while the finite-population correction yielded a minimum sample of approximately 360 respondents. Consistent with the principle that sample size should match the study's inferential purpose (Lakens, 2022), the operational target was increased to 400 to support proportional representation across colleges and year levels and to allow for incomplete responses. G*Power was not used because the sampling target was based on population estimation and proportional stratification rather than on a single a priori effect-size test. College served as the primary stratum and year level as the secondary stratum (Cochran, 1977; Lohr, 2021).

Data collection took place from February to May 2026. The survey was first shared through Google Forms using school and student council communication channels. When several strata still had low response counts, printed questionnaires were distributed to eligible students. Deans, college secretaries, faculty coordinators, student leaders, and class representatives helped reach students across programs and year levels. The online and printed versions used the same questionnaire, consent statement, and five-point response scale. Paper responses were encoded using the same coding rules, checked, and de-identified before analysis.

The mixed-mode procedure was used to improve coverage, not to create a mixed-methods design. After screening, 565 valid responses were retained, which was 165 above the planned target of 400. All college and year-level strata met or exceeded their target counts. Valid excess responses were kept because they came from the intended population and improved the precision of the estimates; removing them only to return the dataset to the original target would have discarded usable information.

Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-developed, self-administered questionnaire rather than adopting a single existing instrument verbatim. Its constructs were adapted conceptually from established literature: the transparency items were mapped to disclosure, clarity, and accuracy/timeliness (Schnackenberg et al., 2021), while the trust items reflected ability, integrity, and benevolence from organizational trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995). Responses used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly

agree). Council transparency contained five core items (CT1-CT5) covering clarity of decisions, timeliness of announcements, updates after activities, official information sources, and consistency of communication. Digital transparency had two conditional items (CT6-CT7) for students who followed or regularly checked an official council page, group, or channel. Student trust had five items (TR1-TR5) covering integrity, competence, reliability, concern for students, and overall trust. Participation had four items (P1-P4), with two items reflecting recent participation behavior and two reflecting intention to participate.

Content validity was assessed by three validators using a validation rating form adapted from Oducado (2020). Across 13 validation criteria, the overall mean rating was 3.51 (SD = 0.22), and all ratings fell within the relevant-to-highly relevant range. Before the main survey, the researcher-developed questionnaire was pilot-tested with 26 students. The consolidated Cronbach's alpha for the core instrument (CT1-CT5, TR1-TR5, and P1-P4) was .966, indicating excellent internal consistency. The conditional digital-transparency items were not included in that consolidated alpha because only applicable respondents answered them. Reliability was checked again in the final dataset and ranged from acceptable to excellent across the reported scales.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed in Python 3.13 using pandas 2.2, SciPy 1.17, NumPy 2.3, and statsmodels 0.14. Descriptive statistics summarized the sample and scale scores, and Cronbach's alpha assessed reliability. Before parametric testing, normality was examined using Shapiro-Wilk tests, skewness, and excess kurtosis. Shapiro-Wilk tests were significant for the main composite scores ($p < .001$), which is common in large samples of bounded Likert-based scores. Absolute skewness ranged from 0.48 to 0.93 and excess kurtosis from 0.14 to 0.92, indicating moderate rather than extreme departures from normality. Because formal normality tests are sensitive to sample size (Demir, 2022), parametric analyses were retained given the large sample and moderate distribution shapes, with Welch procedures used for unequal groups. Welch's t-test was limited to male and female respondents; other or unstated gender responses were reported descriptively.

Pearson correlation and ordinary least squares regression were used to examine the relationships among transparency, trust, and participation. Mediation followed Hayes' (2018) Model 4 logic. The indirect effect (a x b) was estimated with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% percentile confidence interval; mediation was supported when that interval did not include zero. Because digital-transparency scores were available only for students who followed or checked an official channel, they were summarized separately and examined with correlation rather than entered into the full-sample mediation model. Statistical significance for the other tests was evaluated at alpha = .05. This combination of a large sample, Welch procedures for unequal groups, and bootstrap inference for the indirect effect reduced reliance on strict normality assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Approvals and permissions were obtained before the conduct of the study and data collection. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were assured that the data would be used for academic purposes only. Informed consent was obtained from respondents. Student numbers were not included in the dataset. The gender item was optional, and respondents could choose to leave the item blank. All data were reported in aggregate form, and the dataset was fully de-identified before analysis. Data handling followed the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring confidentiality and proper data protection.

FINDINGS

Respondents' Profile

A total of 565 valid undergraduate responses were collected, 165 more than the target of 400. All college and year-level strata were completed. The largest group was College of Nursing, Public Health and Midwifery (n = 111). This was followed by College of Engineering and Architecture (n = 86), Arts and Sciences (n = 73), College of Medicine and Allied Medical Programs (n = 73), and College of Information

Technology (n = 71). Other colleges were smaller in number, but all required strata were completed, as shown in Table 1.

Year level also met the plan for the purposes of analysis (see Figure 2). First-year students were in the largest group, followed by second-year, third-year and fourth/fifth year students. This distribution was also beneficial for the sampling plan, as the study required coverage of both college and year level, not just a large sample size.

Figure 2

Distribution of Final Respondents by Year Level

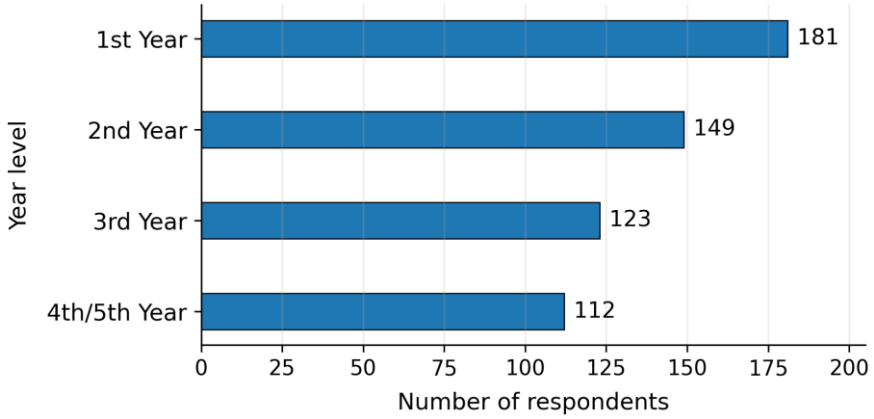


Table 1

Respondent distribution and strata compliance by college

College	Target n	Actual n	Excess n
Accountancy	26	54	28
Arts & Sciences	20	73	53
Business Education	54	54	0
Criminology	16	20	4
Education	16	23	7
Engineering & Architecture	85	86	1
Information Technology	15	71	56
Medicine & Allied Medical Programs	68	73	5
Nursing / Public Health / Midwifery	100	111	11
Total	**400**	**565**	**165**

Descriptive Results and Reliability

Table 2 lists the main scale scores. Students gave council transparency a mean score of 3.76 (SD = 0.88). Digital transparency, which was based only on scores of students who followed or checked an official council channel, was 3.84 (SD = .95). Student trust was 3.78 (SD = .89). Participation was 3.50 (SD = .92). All mean scores were above the scale midpoint. Participation intention (M = 3.43) was lower than participation behavior (M = 3.58). The reliability values were acceptable to excellent, ranging from .745 for participation behavior to .951 for student trust.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and final reliability check

Scale	N	Mean	SD	Cronbach alpha
Council transparency core (CT1-CT5)	565	3.764	0.882	0.931
Digital transparency (CT6-CT7)	468	3.843	0.945	0.874
Student trust (TR1-TR5)	565	3.776	0.886	0.951

Scale	N	Mean	SD	Cronbach alpha
Student participation (P1-P4)	565	3.502	0.924	0.863
Participation behavior (P1-P2)	565	3.578	0.973	0.745
Participation intention (P3-P4)	565	3.426	1.048	0.890

Note. Digital transparency was computed only for respondents who followed or checked an official council online channel.

College and Gender Comparisons

Table 3 shows the college comparisons. Council transparency, student trust, student participation, and digital transparency did not differ between the colleges at the .05 level. The effect for trust was near the cutoff, F (8, 158.97) = 1.92, p = .060, but not statistically significant. The descriptive means were different among the colleges.

For the gender comparison, only respondents who identified as male or female were included. Female respondents gave slightly higher transparency ratings (M = 3.86) than male respondents (M = 3.68), with the difference reaching the .05 level, t = -2.00, p = .047. Student trust, participation, and digital transparency showed no significant differences at the same level. Not all respondents provided their gender. This may have affected the results.

Table 3

Welch ANOVA results for college comparisons

Variable	F	Df	p	Decision
Council transparency	1.32	8, 160.69	.238	Not significant
Student trust	1.92	8, 158.97	.060	Not significant
Student participation	1.32	8, 157.98	.236	Not significant
Digital transparency	1.26	8, 135.75	.268	Not significant

Transparency, Trust, and Participation

The correlation results were consistent with the proposed model. Council transparency showed a strong relationship with student trust (r = .767, p < .001) and a moderate relationship with participation (r = .463, p < .001). Student trust was also moderately related to participation (r = .549, p < .001). Digital transparency had a weaker but significant relationship with participation (r = .332, p < .001).

Table 4 shows the regression results. Transparency was associated with trust (b = 0.771, β = .767, p < .001) and explained 58.8% of the variance in trust among the participants. It also predicted participation on its own (b = 0.485, β = .463, p < .001), accounting for 21.4% of the variance.

When transparency and trust were entered together, trust remained significantly related to participation (b = 0.491, β = .471, p < .001). The direct effect of transparency was smaller and no longer statistically significant (b = 0.107, β = .102, p = .064), while the combined model explained 30.6% of the variance in participation. The bootstrapped indirect effect of transparency on participation through trust was b = 0.379, with a 95% confidence interval from 0.280 to 0.472. Because the interval did not include zero, the mediation effect was significant. In this sample, the association between transparency and participation was statistically carried primarily through student trust.

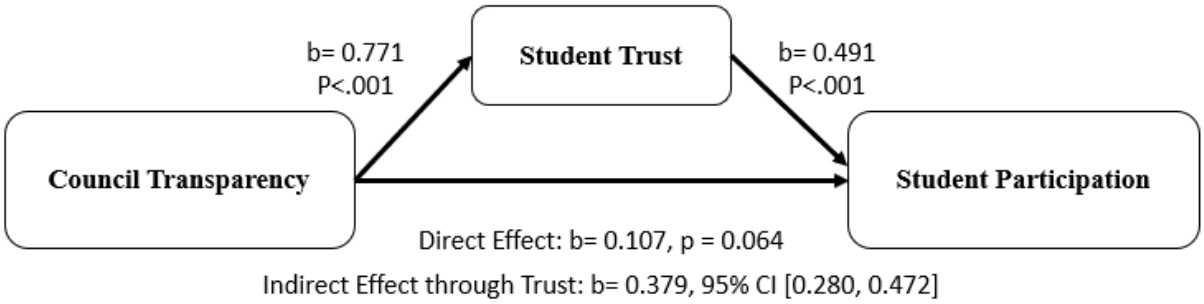
Table 4

Regression Results for the Transparency-Trust-Participation Model

Model / Path	b	SE	Beta	t	p	R^2
Trust on transparency	0.771	0.027	0.767	28.33	< .001	.588
Participation on transparency	0.485	0.039	0.463	12.40	< .001	.214

Model / Path	b	SE	Beta	t	p	R^2
Participation on trust, controlling transparency	0.491	0.057	0.471	8.61	< .001	.306
Participation on transparency, controlling trust	0.107	0.057	0.102	1.86	.064	.306

Figure 3
Mediation Model Coefficients



DISCUSSION

Transparency, Trust, and Participation

Students reported higher trust when they perceived council communication as more transparent. This result is consistent with the theoretical view that people use visible information to judge competence, integrity, and credibility (Mayer et al., 1995; Schnackenberg et al., 2021). It also agrees with recent empirical work. Abitbol et al. (2022) found that perceived communication transparency was positively linked with trust and behavioral intentions, while Zheng (2023) showed that transparency strategies can help rebuild trust by making accountability and substantive information more visible. In the present study, the same pattern appeared in a student-governance setting: clear decisions, timely announcements, regular updates, and recognizable official channels were strongly associated with students' trust in council officers.

Trust remained an important predictor when transparency and trust were considered together. This helps explain why information alone may not be enough to bring students into consultations, activities, or volunteer work. Students still have to believe that their representatives are capable, honest, and likely to act on commitments. Lo (2025) similarly emphasizes trust as a central condition in shared university governance, especially when student participation and institutional decision-making meet. Kennedy and Pek (2023) add that participation is more meaningful when students experience it as authentic and consequential. Taken together, these studies help explain why a council can communicate frequently and still struggle with participation if students are unsure whether the communication reflects dependable action.

The mediation result provides the clearest contribution of the study. The indirect effect through trust was significant, while the direct transparency-participation path was not significant after trust was included. This pattern is consistent with trust as the link between transparency and participation in the proposed model. The finding fits organizational trust theory: visible and understandable communication gives students evidence about the council's integrity, competence, and concern, and those judgments can reduce the uncertainty involved in deciding whether participation is worthwhile. Because the design is cross-sectional, however, the mediation should be interpreted as a statistical indirect association rather than proof of temporal causation.

Participation had a lower mean than both transparency and trust. This gap is important because favorable views of communication do not automatically become action. Enim et al. (2024) describe

student participation as multidimensional and dependent on real opportunities to take part in decision-making and other institutional activities. Mendes and Hammett (2023) also caution that student voice can become procedural when institutions emphasize the appearance of engagement more than its consequences. The present findings are consistent with those concerns: students may trust a council and still decide not to participate because of workload, timing, personal interest, or uncertainty about whether a particular activity matters to them.

No significant differences were found across colleges for transparency, trust, participation, or digital transparency. Within this university, students from different academic units therefore showed broadly similar patterns even though their descriptive means were not identical. Because all nine colleges share the same institutional environment, this similarity may reflect common expectations about how student councils communicate. The result should not be read as proof that every college council works in the same way; rather, it suggests that the transparency-trust-participation pattern is not confined to only one academic unit in the institution.

Digital transparency adds a useful qualification to the main result. Students who followed official online channels generally rated them positively, but digital transparency relates less strongly with participation than overall transparency and trust. This supports the idea that access to posts is only one part of transparent governance. Ruppel et al. (2022) show that transparency can reduce uncertainty, but communication systems can also create overload when information becomes difficult to organize. In student councils, a page or group becomes more useful when it connects announcements with explanations, outcomes, and clear ways to participate. Digital visibility without follow-through may therefore inform students without necessarily moving them to act.

The gender comparison should be interpreted cautiously because the item was optional and a substantial group did not state gender. Female respondents gave slightly higher transparency ratings than male respondents, while trust, participation, and digital transparency did not show significant male-female differences. The finding may point to different experiences with council communication, but the incomplete gender data do not support a strong substantive conclusion. It is better treated as a pattern for future investigation than as evidence of a stable gender difference.

Practical Implications

For practice, transparency should begin before activities and continue after them. Councils can release announcements early, use one recognizable official channel, explain major decisions briefly, and post short summaries of results or next steps. Digital platforms are most useful when they do more than advertise events: they should also preserve a searchable record of council actions and show how student input was handled. Student-affairs offices and advisers can support this practice with simple templates for announcements, minutes, reports, and feedback summaries.

After an activity or consultation, a short record can note what was announced, how students responded, the main concerns raised, actions taken, and any next steps. A brief post or one-page summary is enough if it is easy to find. These records help students follow unresolved concerns and also give incoming officers a practical reference, making transparency part of routine council work rather than an end-of-term exercise.

Student Leadership and Training

Leadership training can extend beyond event planning to include clear writing, posting schedules, basic record-keeping, and summaries of consultation results. A simple turnover file containing templates, schedules, reports, and account information can help new officers continue these practices consistently when leadership changes.

Accountability and Coordination

Advisers and administrators can reinforce the same standards by guiding officers to explain decisions, document completed actions, and keep records that students can access. Consistent communication

matters more than complex systems; over time, visible follow-through can strengthen students' trust in the council.

Participation also requires attention because intention was lower than reported participation behavior. Councils should make opportunities to join clear, explain why involvement matters, and be realistic about the time required. A simple cycle of planning, consulting, acting, and reporting can help students see whether their input leads to visible results.

Limitations

This study used a cross-sectional design, so the results should not be taken as evidence of cause and effect. The findings also come from a single university, which may limit how far they can be applied to other settings. Data were collected through both online and printed surveys, so responses may have been given in slightly different conditions. Although all planned strata were completed, some colleges had more responses than others, and this should be kept in mind when looking at the descriptive results.

Data Handling

The excess valid responses were kept since they still met the inclusion criteria and reflected the target population. Leaving them out would have reduced the precision of the results. For transparency, both the target and the actual responses are shown in the strata table.

Future Research

Future studies may follow students over time, compare different universities, or use interviews to better understand why some students stay inactive even when they see council communication in a positive way. This could also help identify real barriers like workload, scheduling, or lack of interest in certain activities.

CONCLUSION

Students across the nine colleges reported above-midpoint levels of council transparency. First, students across the nine colleges reported above-midpoint levels of council transparency (M = 3.76), digital transparency (M = 3.84), trust (M = 3.78), and participation (M = 3.50). Second, the four measures did not differ significantly across colleges. In the gender comparison, female respondents rated transparency slightly higher than male respondents, while trust, participation, and digital transparency did not differ significantly. Third, council transparency strongly predicted student trust and also predicted participation in the total-effect model. Fourth, student trust significantly mediated the relationship between transparency and participation: the bootstrapped indirect effect was b = 0.379, 95% CI [0.280, 0.472], while the direct effect of transparency after trust was included was not statistically significant (p = .064). Taken together, the results support the proposed statistical mediation model and show that, in this university, transparency was associated with participation mainly through the trust students placed in their council representatives.

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