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**Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity  
and Organizational Justice on the Relationship between  
Information Transparency and Organizational Trust  
in Jiangxi, China**



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## Abstrak

Krisis kepercayaan organisasi di institusi pengajian tinggi (HEI) di China semakin meruncing. Sebagai pihak berkepentingan utama dalam organisasi, para pensyarah menunjukkan tahap skeptisisme yang semakin tinggi terhadap kredibiliti komunikasi dan tadbir urus institusi, terutamanya ketika berlakunya krisis pendapat awam dalam talian. Kepercayaan organisasi adalah penting untuk mengekalkan keutuhan dalaman dan memastikan tadbir urus yang berkesan di HEI. Namun begitu, bukti empirikal mengenai cara membina dan mengekalkan kepercayaan organisasi dalam konteks krisis di HEI China masih terhad. Kajian ini menangani jurang tersebut dengan meneliti hubungan di antara ketelusan maklumat dan kepercayaan organisasi, berasaskan Teori Isyarat dan Teori Pertukaran Sosial. Ia turut mengkaji peranan pengantara berkaitan keaslian tanggapan dan keadilan organisasi. Reka bentuk kajian kuantitatif digunakan dengan soal selidik berstruktur dalam talian. Ia diedar melalui WeChat dengan menggunakan platform WJX. Persampelan rawak berstrata memperolehi 375 data sah daripada para pensyarah dari lima HEI di Wilayah Jiangxi. Analisis data dijalankan menggunakan SPSS 27 dan SmartPLS 4.0. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa persepsi pensyarah terhadap ketelusan maklumat, keaslian, keadilan organisasi, dan kepercayaan organisasi adalah pada tahap sederhana. Ketiga-tiga dimensi ketelusan maklumat iaitu pendedahan, ketepatan, dan kejelasan, mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dan positif dengan kepercayaan organisasi, dengan dimensi ketepatan memberi pengaruh paling besar. Selain itu, keaslian tanggapan dan keadilan organisasi bertindak sebagai pengantara separa dalam hubungan ini. Secara teori, kajian ini memperkayakan konsep kepercayaan organisasi dengan merangkumkannya dalam krisis pendapat awam di HEI China, mengintegrasikan keaslian tanggapan dan keadilan organisasi dalam proses pembinaan kepercayaan, serta memperluaskan aplikasi Teori Isyarat dan Teori Pertukaran Sosial kepada komunikasi krisis dalam pendidikan tinggi. Dari segi praktikal, dapatan kajian ini memberi panduan strategik kepada pemimpin HEI dalam menginstitusikan amalan komunikasi yang telus, tepat, dan adil seterusnya memperkukuhkan kepercayaan dan meningkatkan daya tahan krisis dalam persekitaran media digital China yang dinamik.

**Kata Kunci:** Ketelusan maklumat, Keadilan organisasi, Kepercayaan organisasi, Keaslian tanggapan, Krisis pendapat awam

## Abstract

Organizational trust crises in China's higher education institutions (HEIs) are becoming increasingly acute. As core organizational stakeholders, lecturers are showing heightened skepticism towards the credibility of institutional communication and governance, particularly during online public opinion crises. Organizational trust is essential for sustaining internal cohesion and ensuring effective governance in HEIs. Yet, empirical evidence on how to cultivate and maintain organizational trust in crisis contexts within China's HEIs remains limited. This study bridges this gap by examining the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust, grounded in the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory. It further investigates the mediating roles of perceived authenticity and organizational justice. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured online survey. It was distributed via WeChat through the WJX platform. Stratified random sampling yielded 375 valid data from lecturers from five HEIs in Jiangxi Province. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 27 and SmartPLS 4.0. The findings indicate that lecturers' perceptions of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust are at moderate levels. All three dimensions of information transparency, namely disclosure, accuracy, and clarity, are significantly and positively associated with organizational trust, with the accuracy dimension exerting the strongest influence. Furthermore, perceived authenticity and organizational justice act as partial mediators in these relationships. Theoretically, this study enriches the conceptualization of organizational trust by contextualizing it within public opinion crises in China's HEIs, integrating perceived authenticity and organizational justice into the trust-building process, and extending the application of the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory to higher education crisis communication. Practically, the findings provide strategic guidance for HEI leaders to institutionalize transparent, accurate, and fair communication practices, thereby strengthening trust and enhancing crisis resilience in China's dynamic digital media environment.

**Keywords:** Information transparency, Organizational justice, Organizational trust, Perceived authenticity, Public opinion crisis

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## List of Abbreviations

AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CB-SEM	Covariance Based Structural Equation Modeling
DV	Dependent Variable
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
F <sup>2</sup>	Effect Size
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HTMT	Heterotrait-Monotrait
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
IT	Information Transparency
IT-A	Information Transparency- Accuracy
IT-C	Information Transparency- Clarity
IT-D	Information Transparency- Disclosure
IV	Independent Variable
MV	Mediating Variable
OCB	Organizational Citizenship Behavior
OJ	Organizational Justice
OT	Organizational Trust
PA	Perceived Authenticity
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling
Q <sup>2</sup>	Predictive Relevance
R <sup>2</sup>	Coefficient Determination
SET	Social Exchange Theory
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ST	Signaling Theory
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UUM	Universiti Utara Malaysia
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a background description of the entire study, followed by an explanation of the problem statement which subsequently leads to the formation of the research questions and research objectives. Next, the significance and scope of the study are elaborated, followed by the definition of terms. This chapter then explains the organization of the thesis and concludes with a summary of the entire chapter.

### 1.2 Background of Study

Public trust in higher education institutions (HEIs) has become a topic of global concern (Law & Le, 2023; Van Vught, 2021). HEIs not only serve as centers of academic excellence, but also uphold transparency, fairness, and social responsibility (Lewicka, 2022; Van Vught, 2021). When trust in HEIs deteriorates due to scandals, policy controversies, or governance failures, it can undermine institutional legitimacy, reduce stakeholder engagement, and threaten long-term sustainability (Law & Le, 2023).

Across the globe, HEIs have experienced mounting public opinion crises, often triggered by scandals, governance failures, or controversial incidents (Miotto, Del-Castillo-Feito, & Blanco-González, 2020; Xia, 2023). In the United States, disputes over academic freedom and social justice have led to campus protests and reputational

risks (Arm, 2025; Suissa & Sullivan, 2021). In the United Kingdom, funding cuts and allegations of administrative opacity have damaged trust in institutional governance (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). In Australia, cases of misconduct and discrimination have intensified media scrutiny and triggered public backlash (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). These examples show that HEIs are not immune to the reputational hazards traditionally associated with corporate or political sectors.

In China, the frequency and impact of public opinion crises at HEIs have significantly increased in the digital age. Cases involving food safety, inappropriate behavior by faculty and staff, student suicides, and administrative opacity have gone viral on platforms such as Weibo, sparking widespread discussion and reputational damage (Gao, Li, Zhang, & Bi, 2024; Yang & Miao, 2022). Incidents such as the discovery of mice at university canteen stalls; two lecturers were employed who were relatives of the administrative members; and allegations of academic misconduct by students at Wuhan University have all drawn public attention (Li, 2020; Liu, Wang, Wang, & Chen, 2024; People's Daily Online – Jiangxi Channel, 2023). Such crises often unfold rapidly and exacerbated by the speed and influence of social media (Liu et al., 2024; Yang & Miao, 2022).

Therefore, managing public opinion crises is a growing challenge for HEIs, both globally and in China. Unlike corporations or political bodies, HEIs are characterized by their unique social functions and stakeholder structures (Ali, Mustapha, Osman, &

Hassan, 2020; Rumambi, Kaparang, Lintong, Tangon, & Ohoitumur, 2019). They operate as semi-public, non-profit organizations with competing demands from students, faculty, government, and society (Anholon et al., 2024). This makes crisis management in HEIs particularly complex. While other organizations may prioritize financial loss or political capital, HEIs must protect academic reputation, institutional trust, and internal morale simultaneously (Niedlich, Kallfaß, Pohle, & Bormann, 2021).

Moreover, HEI crises often escalate in emotionally charged environments. The public often regards educational institutions as custodians of fairness and truth, and even slight deviations from these expectations may trigger intensified backlash (Yang & Miao, 2022). Internal stakeholders such as lecturers also play a more autonomous role than in other organizations (Dong, 2020). Their reactions are not merely operational but also deeply relational, grounded in trust, identification, and institutional loyalty (He & Chi, 2021).

In the context of a public relations crisis, information dissemination and sentiment formation follow distinct patterns. Information asymmetry between administrators and stakeholders may exacerbate misunderstandings and speculation, especially narratives involving perceived injustice which can spread rapidly, shaping public attitudes and institutional image (Liu et al., 2024). Once trust is eroded, it is difficult to rebuild, especially if the institution's communication is perceived as vague, insincere, or delayed (Yang & Miao, 2022; Zhu, 2022b).

The primary challenges in managing higher education crises include poor transparency, inadequate internal communication, delayed responses, and underestimation of social media dynamics (Liu, Pan, Bai, Wang, & Chen, 2021a; Wang, Fang, & Jiang, 2023). Information may be selectively released or suppressed, which often backfires, sparking greater public suspicion (Liu et al., 2024; Wang & Guan, 2023). Additionally, the emotional fluctuations in public opinion, driven by online comments, rumors, and public polarization, further complicate institutions' efforts to mitigate damage (Zhang, 2022; Xu, Liu, Chen, & Yang, 2022). This puts emphasis on the importance of timely, transparent, and credible communication.

Information transparency plays a central role in crisis response (Calonge, Aguerrebere, Hultberg, & Connor, 2021). It refers to the extent to which institutions provide timely, accurate, and accessible information (Schnackenberg, Tomlinson, & Coen, 2021). In crisis situations, transparency can serve both as a damage control mechanism and a proactive strategy to build trust. By narrowing information gaps, transparent communication helps address rumors, clarify institutional positions, and demonstrate moral responsibility (Bellantoni, Badr, & Alfonsi, 2020; Yue, Men, & Ferguson, 2019).

One of the key factors in building internal trust is perceived authenticity, namely the extent to which stakeholders believe that an institution's actions is aligned with its core values and genuine intentions (Lee, 2020). In a public relations crisis, if lecturers perceive the HEIs' response as sincere and consistent with its established principles,

they are more likely to support it (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). However, a gap between rhetoric and reality may lead to cynicism and disengagement (Gedrimiene, Celik, Mäkitalo, & Muukkonen, 2023).

Another key concept is organizational justice, which encompasses stakeholders' perceptions of the justice of institutional processes (procedural justice), treatment (interactional justice), and outcomes (distributive justice) (Chi, He, & Chen, 2021; Yu & Chen, 2023). Justice procedures enhance psychological safety, commitment, and willingness to cooperate during crises (Chi et al., 2021; Yu & Chen, 2023). During public opinion crises, perceptions of unfairness may exacerbate distrust and fuel internal dissent.

This study focuses on HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China, which has faced a disproportionate number of public relations crises in recent years, ranging from campus food safety issues to administrative misconduct, repeatedly attracting national media attention and scrutiny (Legal Daily, 2023; People's Daily Online – Jiangxi Channel, 2023). This context provides both a representative and analytically rich setting to explore trust-related challenges in China's higher education sector.

Although previous studies have examined crisis communication in HEIs, most had focused on external media strategies or public relations outcomes, with limited attention to trust mechanisms among internal stakeholders during crises (Gratz &

Looney, 2025; Jiang, Kamaruddin, Mahamad, Guo, & Wu, 2025). There is a gap in understanding how lecturers, who play a critical role in institutional operations, perceive and respond to crisis management (Yu & Chen, 2023). Existing literature has not sufficiently integrated the roles of information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice in shaping internal organizational trust within HEIs during public opinion crises (Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Schnackenberg et al., 2021).

This study developed a conceptual framework linking information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice, as they influence organizational trust during crises. The framework aims to elucidate how internal trust is formed or destroyed under public scrutiny, particularly from the perspective of lecturers. This contributes to the theoretical development of organizational trust in higher education and provides practical guidance for crisis management. The next section introduces the problem statement that forms the basis of this study.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

In the context of China's rapidly evolving digital environment, HEIs are increasingly vulnerable to public opinion crises (Li, 2024; Liu & Zhang, 2024). Policy disputes, administrative misconduct, campus conflicts, and other incidents are often amplified through social media, attracting widespread public attention (Gao et al., 2024; Yang & Miao, 2022; Zou, 2023). These crises not only threaten the HEIs' external reputation, but also cause internal instability (Jiang et al., 2025). Among internal stakeholders,

lecturers are both key participants in institutional communication and primary recipients of administrative decisions during crises (Mayowa-Adebara & Enakrire, 2024). Their perceptions of the HEIs' communication methods, the fairness of decision-making, and the authenticity of information significantly influence their organizational trust levels, which in turn impact the organization's cohesion and responsiveness (Ali, Ullah, & Nawaz, 2023).

However, the current crisis response mechanisms of China's HEIs place great emphasis on external media management and ignore the internal emotional and cognitive responses of faculty and staff (Islam & Haque, 2022; Jiang et al., 2025). Given that lecturers, as well-informed and actively engaged professionals, often hold higher expectations for institutional accountability and responsiveness, this gap becomes increasingly evident (Ali et al., 2023; Mayowa-Adebara & Enakrire, 2024). Their level of trust can significantly impact organizational cohesion, emotional commitment, and even the institution's reputation in academic and public spheres (Xiao & Luo, 2021; He & Chi, 2021). Without a nuanced understanding of how trust is formed or eroded under crisis conditions, HEIs risk further internal division, declining morale, and reputational damage (Kong & Chen, 2022).

To better understand how organizational trust is built or eroded during crises, it is necessary to explore its key antecedents. One such key factor is information transparency. Information transparency is often regarded as a critical predictor of

organizational trust. It refers to the integrity, clarity, and accuracy demonstrated by an organization in the dissemination of information (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). During crisis events, HEIs often face high-pressure environments from students, parents, and public opinion. Timely and clear dissemination of relevant information helps alleviate anxiety, reduce suspicion, and build trust (Jiang et al., 2025). Transparent communication not only satisfies the basic requirements of internal members for the right to know, but also helps to enhance employee trust and support for management during crises, thereby promoting organizational unity and collaboration (Niwagaba, 2025). Therefore, clarifying the mechanism by which information transparency affects organizational trust in HEIs will help guide public opinion and maintain internal stability more effectively during crises.

While transparency reflects the quantity and clarity of disclosed information, perceived authenticity reflects stakeholders' judgments regarding the truthfulness and ethical integrity of such information (Hopwood et al., 2021). Perceived authenticity refers to individuals' subjective assessments of an organization's consistency between words and actions, ethical standards, and value positions (Cha et al., 2019; Lehman, O'Connor, Kovács, & Newman, 2019). In a public relations crisis, the public's perception of an organization depends not only on what it "says", but also on whether it is "authentic" (Hewlin, Karelaia, Kouchaki, & Sedikides, 2020). Speaking the truth and taking concrete actions have become core factors in building trust through crisis communication at HEIs (Luiz, 2024). Compared to HEIs that use overly embellished

language, those that present unadorned truth are more likely to resonate with faculty and staff and gain their trust (Lee, 2023). Furthermore, research indicates that information transparency alone is insufficient to cultivate trust, because if transparent information is perceived as “untruthful” or “selfish,” it can actually undermine trust (Sahin & Burnaz, 2020). Therefore, clarifying the mechanisms through which perceptions of authenticity influence organizational trust can help HEIs develop more persuasive and credible communication strategies during crises, thereby mitigating the erosion of trust caused by “formal transparency” coupled with “substantive insincerity”.

In addition to perceptions of transparency and authenticity, organizational justice is another key determinant of trust (Mubashar, Musharraf, Khan, & Butt, 2022; Sheeraz, Ahmad, Ishaq, Sarfraz, & Nor, 2021; Wang & Guan, 2023). Organizational justice reflects lecturers’ perceptions of justice in resource allocation, decision-making processes, and interpersonal interactions within the organization, including distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Colquitt, 2001). In the context of a public relations crisis, if lecturers perceive bias or unfairness in how HEIs handle related responsibilities, communicate information, or hold individuals accountable, their trust in the organization will rapidly decline (Lin, Beh, & Mohd Kamil, 2024; Xu, Huang, & Huang, 2023). Therefore, systematically examining the organizational justice mediation mechanisms in organizational trust-building can help

HEIs establish crisis management processes, thereby reducing the risk of internal turmoil and enhancing organizational cohesion.

Overall, the three constructs of information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice constitute a comprehensive framework for understanding how organizational trust is established or destroyed during a public opinion crisis. Therefore, clarifying its mechanisms is crucial for improving the internal crisis management strategies of HEIs.

This study addresses research gaps from the perspectives of knowledge, theory, practice, and methodology. First, from a knowledge perspective, research in the field of higher education tends to view transparency as a single concept, often overlooking its multidimensional nature, including disclosure, clarity, and accuracy (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). Only a limited number of studies have explored the relationship between these sub-dimensions and organizational trust, and even fewer have linked them to perceived authenticity and organizational justice, especially in dynamic, high-pressure environments such as the public opinion crises faced by China's HEIs (Schnackenberg et al., 2021; Wang & Ying, 2022).

Additionally, while some studies suggest that transparency can enhance perceptions of justice, most of this work lacks integration across multiple mediators (Chi et al., 2021; Yorulmaz, Püsküllüolu, Colak, & Altnkurt, 2021). The role of organizational justice

as a bridge between transparency and trust has not been sufficiently explored empirically, particularly in academic institutions (Lee, Hong, Shin, & Lee, 2023; Liu et al., 2021b). Similarly, although perceived authenticity is related to credibility and trust in the context of marketing and corporate social responsibility, its role in the perceptions of internal stakeholders, such as how HEI lecturers assess the sincerity and consistency of institutional crisis communication, remains largely unexplored (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Men, Qin, Fitzsimmons, DiStaso, & Heffron, 2024). Therefore, there is a clear knowledge gap in understanding how these variables interact during crises in the education sector to influence organizational trust.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, this study extends the Signaling Theory (ST) and Social Exchange Theory (SET) to HEIs in China. The Signaling Theory has been widely applied to study how the clarity and consistency of communication influence stakeholder behavior (Busser & Shulga, 2019). However, its application in internal communication and trust-building within educational settings remains limited (Park & Yoon, 2024; Rajkhowa et al., 2024). The specific roles of information transparency (signal clarity), perceived authenticity (signal consistency), and justice (signal validity) in influencing internal trust among lecturers in HEIs have not been fully conceptualized (Jiang, 2023; Minutolo, Ivanova, & Cong, 2021). Furthermore, the Social Exchange Theory typically assumes direct trust reciprocity, underestimating the mediating mechanisms in exchange processes (Li, 2020; Mittal, Shubham, & Sengupta, 2019). By introducing organizational justice and perceived authenticity as parallel

mediators, this study contributes to refining the Social Exchange Theory and establishing a more comprehensive framework for trust development in crisis environments.

From a contextual and practical perspective, there is a lack of specific dynamic research during public opinion crises in China's HEIs (Cheng, 2020; Zou, 2023). In China, the rise of digital platforms and society's strong focus on campus incidents such as student suicides, sexual harassment, and administrative misconduct have subjected HEIs to rigorous scrutiny (Jiang et al., 2025). However, many HEIs lack standardized crisis communication protocols to address internal perceptions of credibility and fairness (Zou, 2023). Past research rarely explored how lecturers at China's HEIs, who serve both as internal stakeholders and as crisis communicators, interpret and respond to organizational communication during periods of public scrutiny (Cheng, 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial for improving governance, decision-making, and institutional trust in China's HEIs.

Fourth, from a methodological perspective, most existing studies rely on descriptive statistics, interviews, or cross-sectional surveys focused on direct effects, offering limited insights into the complex multi-path relationship structure (Guan, 2024; Liu, 2024; Xu, 2024). Specifically, there is a lack of empirical research using robust statistical models, such as structural equation modeling (SEM), to explore the mediating role of perceived authenticity and organizational justice in trust formation

(Gong, 2024; Xu, 2023). While mediation is sometimes discussed conceptually, it is rarely tested empirically using latent variable techniques that allow for simultaneous modeling of both direct and indirect effects (Mubashar et al., 2022). This study addresses this empirical gap by employing SEM to investigate mediating mechanisms, thereby enhancing analytical precision and generalizability. This not only strengthens the methodological rigor of trust-related research, but also validates the utility of these mediators in higher education contexts.

These gaps highlight the need for a more comprehensive framework that integrates information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice to explain how HEIs build or undermine organizational trust during public opinion crises. To address this gap, this study proposes a model to investigate: first, the levels of transparency, authenticity, and justice among lecturers during public opinion crises; second, the direct impact of information transparency dimensions (disclosure, clarity, and accuracy) on organizational trust; and third, the mediating role of perceived authenticity and organizational justice in this relationship.

In this process, this study makes meaningful contributions at both the academic and practical levels. Theoretically, this study contributes by applying the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory to the context of China's higher education. While the Signaling Theory has been used to explain how organizations convey credibility through signals such as transparency and authenticity, it has rarely been applied to

analyze how internal stakeholders interpret such signals during crises (Busser & Shulga, 2019). By examining how lecturers perceive and respond to institutional signals, and how their trust is shaped by perceptions of authenticity and justice, the study adds contextual and cultural depth to the Signaling Theory. It also enhances the Social Exchange Theory by identifying psychological mechanisms (e.g., justice and authenticity) through which reciprocal trust is formed, thereby refining its explanatory framework in non-market environments.

In practical terms, these findings offer strategic insights for university administrators and policymakers. A clearer understanding of how lecturers interpret crisis communication and perceive institutional behavior can support more effective internal engagement strategies (Zou, 2023). Promoting transparency, justice, and authenticity not only helps resolve immediate crises, but also builds long-term trust and institutional resilience. This, in turn, supports the overall governance capacity and social responsibility of China's HEIs (Wen, Zhao, Zang, & Li, 2024).

In summary, this study provides a theoretically grounded and empirically tested framework to explain how organizational trust is constructed or eroded in China's HEIs during public opinion crises. It extends the Signaling Theory by contextualizing how internal stakeholders interpret institutional signals under crisis conditions and refines the Social Exchange Theory by identifying justice and authenticity as key mediating mechanisms in trust formation. These theoretical extensions contribute to a

deeper understanding of trust dynamics in non-market public sector environments. At the practical level, the findings offer actionable insights for HEI managers to strengthen internal communication, develop trust-building strategies, and enhance institutional resilience in the face of public scrutiny. Ultimately, this study supports the dual objectives of advancing academic theory and guiding institutional crisis governance and improving internal stakeholder engagement.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

This study draws on the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory to investigate how lecturers perceive and respond to institutional signals during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. The research questions were developed to address the theoretical gaps identified in the problem statement, particularly the insufficient integration of information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice in explaining the formation of organizational trust under crisis conditions.

Accordingly, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are the levels of information transparency, perceived authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust perceived by lecturers during public opinion crises in China's HEIs?
2. What is the effect of information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs?

3. Does the perceived authenticity mediate the effect of information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs?
4. Does the organizational justice mediate the effect of information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs?

### **1.5 Research Objectives**

The research objectives for this study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the level of information transparency, perceived authenticity, organizational justice and organizational trust perceived by lecturers during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.
2. To determine the direct effect of information transparency to organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.
3. To examine the mediating effect of perceived authenticity in information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.
4. To examine the mediating effect of organizational justice in information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study provides significant contributions to knowledge, theory, and practice. From a knowledge perspective, this study addresses key empirical gaps in the organizational behavior and crisis communication literature by focusing on HEIs in China. There is insufficient research on the critical role played by internal stakeholders such as

lecturers during public opinion crises (Jiang et al., 2025; Zou, 2023). This study expands the understanding of how the three dimensions of information transparency, including disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, interact with perceived authenticity and organizational justice to shape organizational trust (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). Most previous research on trust during crises had focused on private or for-profit organizations, with limited attention to the complex internal dynamics of HEIs (Men et al., 2020; Mubashar et al., 2022; Nelson, Hegtvedt, Haardörfer, & Hayward, 2019). This study helps fill this gap by focusing on lecturers as informed and influential internal participants.

Additionally, by collecting and analyzing original survey data from lecturers in China's HEIs, this study provides empirical evidence to support and refine the theoretical relationships proposed in earlier research. The model not only validates the direct impact of transparency on trust but also highlights the mediating mechanisms of authenticity and justice. These findings provide a solid empirical foundation for theoretical construction and cross-contextual comparisons in future organizational trust research.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to and expands upon the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory. In the context of this study, HEIs act as signal senders through their crisis communication practices, while lecturers act as signal receivers, interpreting the content and delivery of information to assess

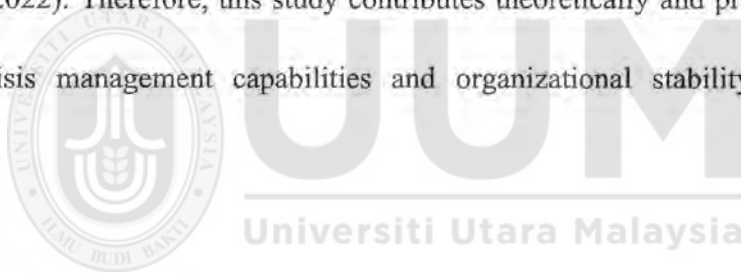
institutional credibility. Although the Signaling Theory has been widely applied in marketing and investor communication, its application in crisis communication within the academic field is limited (Busser & Shulga, 2019; Rajkhowa et al., 2024). This study expands the Signaling Theory by examining how internal stakeholders interpret signals such as transparency and authenticity under high-pressure conditions, thereby enriching its explanatory scope in public sector environments.

Additionally, this study employs the Social Exchange Theory to examine how perceived organizational justice mediates the relationship between transparency and trust. The Social Exchange Theory posits that trust stems from justice and reciprocity in relationships (Cook & Hahn, 2021). This study demonstrates that perceptions of justice, particularly during public opinion crises, can trigger mutual trust behaviors among lecturers, thereby enhancing the applicability of the Social Exchange Theory in non-market environments that are susceptible to crises.

From a practical standpoint, this study offers valuable insights for higher education administrators and policymakers, particularly in the Chinese context. It emphasizes that transparent, truthful, and fair communication strategies during public opinion crises are not only crucial for containing the crisis, but also essential for building long-term trust and institutional resilience (Gratz & Looney, 2025; Kosonen & Ikonen, 2019; Law & Le, 2023). Given that lecturers' attitudes can influence internal morale and external reputation, understanding their trust dynamics is crucial (Dong, 2020;

Calonge et al., 2021). The research findings can serve as a strategic guide for designing communication protocols, managing stakeholder perceptions, and improving internal governance mechanisms during crises.

Furthermore, although this study was conducted in Jiangxi Province, China's overall institutional logic and media environment suggest that it has broad applicability across HEIs nationwide (Zhang, Dong, Zhang, Mu, & Yang, 2024; Zou, 2023). Previous studies highlighted the widespread online public opinion crises in China's HEIs, indicating a systemic need for a trust-centered crisis communication framework (Ren, 2021; Yang, 2022). Therefore, this study contributes theoretically and practically to enhancing crisis management capabilities and organizational stability in HEIs nationwide.



### **1.7 Scope of the Study**

This study was conducted at HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China. In recent years, the region has experienced several public relations crises involving universities, including institutional responses to student incidents, administrative decisions, and controversies over policy implementation (Legal Daily, 2023; People's Daily Online – Jiangxi Channel, 2023; Zhang, 2023). These crises have drawn public attention and posed challenges to institutional reputation and internal governance (Zou, 2023). While these issues are not unique to Jiangxi Province, given the diversity of its higher education institutions and its sociocultural similarities with other provinces, the province

provides a representative context for studying crisis response within China's higher education system (Zhang et al., 2024; Zou, 2023).

To enhance the representativeness of the research findings, this study employed a stratified random sampling method across five public HEIs in Jiangxi Province. These institutions vary in size, administrative structure, and academic specializations, providing a comprehensive perspective for examining the views of internal stakeholders.

The study specifically focused on lecturers, who are considered core internal stakeholders (Jiang et al., 2025). As individuals directly involved in academic and institutional activities, lecturers are closely engaged in crisis communication and often serve as both observers and participants in the dissemination and interpretation of institutional information (Dong, 2020; Xu, 2019). In terms of demographic coverage, the study collected data on participants' gender, age, professional position, years of teaching experience, and discipline in order to further analyze how trust formation varies among different subgroups of lecturers.

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the work of Schnackenberg et al. (2021), which divides information transparency into three dimensions: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. The core research model explores how these dimensions of transparency influence organizational trust (the dependent variable) through the

mediating effects of perceived authenticity and organizational justice. The model reflects a comprehensive approach to understanding how HEIs build trust during public opinion crises, particularly in relation to internal communication and institutional accountability.

The research was carried out at HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China. In recent years, there has been a growth in public opinion incidents in HEIs in Jiangxi Province (Legal Daily, 2023; People's Daily Online – Jiangxi Channel, 2023; Zhang, 2023). The administrators of these institutions have failed to effectively address these public opinion crises due to insufficient understanding of public opinion response mechanisms (Ali et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2025). As a result, trust in HEIs has decreased, and their image has been tarnished, which is detrimental to the development of HEIs and social stability (Zhang, 2023). To ensure broad representation, this study randomly chose five HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China.

The study focuses on lecturers who are employed at the selected HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China. As internal stakeholders within these institutions, the lecturers closely monitor the information disseminated during times of public opinion crises (Dong, 2020; Xu, 2019). Due to their advanced education, they are particularly discerning when evaluating information released by their respective HEIs. Their recognition and acceptance of such information following a public relations crisis can have a certain impact on the spread of public sentiment (Jiang et al., 2025; Zou, 2023).

The research delves into how lecturers' perceptions of HEI-released information influence their assessment of its authenticity and justice, subsequently shaping their trust in the HEIs. In terms of the demographic variables, this study examines the respondents' gender, age, position in HEI, years of working experience, and field of expertise in their respective HEIs.

## **1.8 Operational Definitions**

The terms used throughout the paper are defined as follows:

### **1.8.1 Organizational Trust**

In the current study, organizational trust pertains to the positive expectations, beliefs, and sentiments of HEI lecturers regarding the institution's ability to effectively address public opinion crises. They have confidence that the institution can manage and respond adeptly to crises, thus upholding a positive image of the institution (Oguegbe & Edosomwan, 2021). This research measures organizational trust through surveys focusing on competence, integrity, and reliability (Rawlins, 2008).

### **1.8.2 Information Transparency**

Information transparency refers to HEIs providing detailed information about the institution to stakeholders such as lecturers (Khosrowjerdi, 2022; Kim, Kim, & Rothenberg, 2020; Lee, 2023; Zakaria, Aoun, & Liginlal, 2021). In this research, the

measurement encompasses three dimensions: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy (Schnackenberg et al., 2021).

### **1.8.3 Disclosure**

In this study, disclosure refers to whether the HEIs present crisis-related information to lecturers in a complete and open manner, ensure timely communication, and avoid the omission or concealment of important details. This is assessed through various factors, such as whether the information lecturers receive from the institution fully includes what they want to know, covers all the topics they are interested in, provides all the information they need, and whether the organization delivers an adequate amount of information (Schnackenberg et al., 2021).

### **1.8.4 Clarity**

Clarity refers to the perceived degree of transparency and comprehensibility of the information provided to lecturers in the HEIs (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). Clarity is important for the lecturer's ability to decode and interpret the information they receive, and to understand the behavior and intentions of HEI administrators (Virkus & Salman, 2021). Clarity is measured by items such as whether the information provided by the institution is clear, comprehensible, and presented in a language that can be understood (Schnackenberg et al., 2021).

### **1.8.5 Accuracy**

In this current study, accuracy relates to the degree to which HEIs convey messages to lecturers that accurately represent reality, free from exaggeration or bias (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). This is assessed by determining if the information from the HEI is true, correct, accurate, and right.

#### **1.8.6 Perceived Authenticity**

In this research, perceived authenticity refers to the lecturers' perception of the information provided by the HEIs, based on their subjective awareness. The study evaluates various aspects including if the organization always tells the truth, if the organization is willing to admit mistakes, if the organization is consistent with its words and deeds, and so on (Shen & Kim, 2012).

#### **1.8.7 Organizational Justice**

In this study, organizational justice refers to the lecturers' subjective evaluation of the HEIs' management of communication during public opinion crises (Wiseman & Stillwell, 2022). Specifically, this study focuses on two dimensions: procedural justice and interactional justice (Colquitt, 2001). Procedural justice refers to the perceived justice of the process by which HEI managers communicate decisions and information during a crisis, while interactional justice reflects the perceived justice of lecturers' interpersonal interactions such as the degree of respect, empathy, and adequacy of explanations (Na'imah, Tjahjono, & Madjid, 2023). These two dimensions were

selected based on their relevance to trust judgments related to communication in a crisis situation.

### **1.8.8 Public Opinion Crisis**

In this study, a public opinion crisis is conceptualized as a reputation-threatening event for HEIs, characterized by the rapid intensification and widespread dissemination of collective negative sentiment on digital platforms, which challenges institutional legitimacy and credibility (Meng & Xie, 2024; Zhang & Zhang, 2024). These crises typically emerge online, extend beyond individual expressions, and form emotionally charged narratives that shape both internal and external perceptions of HEIs (Jiang et al., 2025; Meng, Xiao, & Wang, 2022). Practically, such crises are identified through a combination of high online visibility, heightened public criticism, and pressure on institutions to respond, distinguishing them from isolated or transient negative commentary (Wang, Wu, Zeng, & Xue, 2022b).

### **1.9 Organization of Thesis**

This study is structured into five distinct chapters. Chapter One (Introduction) begins with the study background. The problem statement is then detailed to determine the variables in the study design. Additionally, the research questions and objectives are proposed. This chapter then outlines the study's significance, scope, and operational definitions of the terms.

Chapter Two (Literature Review) investigates the relevant issues from previous literature. It explores the independent variable of information transparency, the dependent variable of organizational trust, and the mediating variables of perceived authenticity and organizational justice. The study also examines associated research and the connections between these variables. Drawing from the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the study constructs its theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, building on the relationships established in the literature review, this study proposes the hypotheses.

Chapter Three (Methodology) details the research paradigm and provides an overview of the research design for this study. It discusses the population and sampling methods. Additionally, it introduces the research instruments including the scales, questionnaire design, and pilot studies. Finally, it clarifies the procedures involved in data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four (Research Findings) presents the results of the data analysis in a structured manner. It begins with an overview of the data collection process and response rates, followed by data screening procedures, including removal of invalid responses, detection of outliers, and handling of missing values. Normality tests and descriptive statistics are then reported to provide an overall profile of the respondents. Subsequently, the results of the hypothesis testing are presented, along with a detailed assessment of the measurement model and structural pattern.

Chapter Five (Discussion and Conclusions) summarizes the entire study. It presents a summary of the main findings, the contribution of the study, and implications for HEI administrators. Lastly, the chapter points out the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for forthcoming researchers.

### **1.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the background of the study, outlined the problem statement, formulated the research questions, and established objectives of this study. Additionally, the significance and scope of the study were discussed, and the operational definitions of crucial terms were defined. Finally, the organizational framework was presented. The next chapter will explore the literature on variables such as organizational trust, information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the relevant literature on organizational trust in China's HEIs within the context of public opinion crisis and establishes the relationship among the research variables. The variables involved in this study are organizational trust, information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice. The concepts, dimensions, and related studies for all the variables will also be provided. All possible relationships between the study variables will be explained, followed by the underpinning theory and research framework. Lastly, the research hypotheses will be proposed based on the literature review.

#### **2.2 Public Opinion Crisis**

Public opinion crisis refers to a situation where negative public discourse escalates to a level that threatens an organization's reputation, legitimacy, or stakeholder trust (de León et al., 2025; Fang & Fu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Unlike traditional crises arising from physical incidents such as accidents or financial misconduct, public opinion crises are perception-driven, emerging and amplified through digital media platforms (Piña-García & Espinoza, 2022; Zheng, Su, Luo, & Liu-Lastre, 2023). These crises are often unpredictable, highly visible, and capable of causing significant reputational damage if not addressed through timely and transparent communication strategies (Jiang et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022b).

A crucial aspect of crisis identification is distinguishing between ordinary public commentary and discourse that signifies an actual crisis (Khanum & Shahid, 2021; Ye, 2022). Certain indicators can help an institution assess the severity of public discourse. The first consideration is the scope and virality of the discourse. When a discussion rapidly gains traction across digital platforms, transcending localized conversations and drawing attention from mainstream media or regulatory bodies, it transitions from isolated feedback to a potential public opinion crisis (Gong, 2024). Alongside its spread, the emotional intensity embedded in public sentiment serves as a vital indicator. When discourse escalates into collective outrage, moral condemnation, and widespread demands for institutional accountability, it signifies a reputational threat that surpasses routine criticism (Hu, 2024b). However, the most decisive factor is the erosion of stakeholder trust (Gong, 2024; Xiong, 2024). When key stakeholders such as lecturers, students, and governing bodies begin to question the institution's credibility and justice, the situation evolves into a trust crisis requiring strategic intervention (Xiong, 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

HEIs are especially vulnerable to public opinion crises due to their societal role as custodians of knowledge and ethics. Issues related to governance decisions, academic integrity, faculty misconduct, campus safety, and the management of sensitive incidents are all potential flashpoints for public opinion crises (Liu et al., 2024; Xiong, 2024). In the context of China, the frequency and intensity of such crises are often exacerbated by institutional deficiencies in information transparency and

responsiveness, leading to profound trust deficits among stakeholders (Fang & Fu, 2025; Hong, Kim, & Lee, 2023).

Several cases illustrate how mishandled communication and governance failures have escalated localized incidents into nationwide public opinion crises. A prominent example is the 2023 “Rat Head Incident” at Jiangxi Industrial Vocational and Technical College (People’s Daily Online – Jiangxi Channel, 2023). A student’s video showing a suspected rat head in a cafeteria meal went viral, and the college’s initial denial, in which it claimed the object was a “duck neck,” triggered widespread public skepticism. The crisis intensified due to the institution’s evasive communication strategy, culminating in a provincial-level investigation which confirmed that the object was indeed a rat’s head. This incident highlighted how dismissive and non-transparent responses can exacerbate reputational risks and erode public trust (Hu, 2024b; Liu et al., 2024).

Similarly, the 2023-2025 Wuhan University Library Sexual Harassment Controversy demonstrates the consequences of opaque disciplinary procedures. After a student reported sexual harassment, the university’s prompt yet non-transparent sanctioning was criticized as a superficial measure to appease public outrage. The crisis resurfaced in 2025 when a court ruling contradicted the university’s earlier disciplinary decision, reigniting public criticism regarding the institution’s flawed crisis handling processes (Qianjiang Evening News, 2025).

Another illustrative case is the 2025 gym conflict at Jiangxi University of Science and Technology, where a physical altercation between international and domestic students over gym access escalated into a public debate over perceived double standards in campus governance (HNR News, 2025). The HEI's delayed and non-specific response, coupled with its decision to disable online comment sections, fueled perceptions of procedural injustice and lack of transparency, further damaging its credibility.

These crises often follow a typical pattern of escalation. Initially, the incident garners internal attention within the HEI, where stakeholders seek clarity and accountability (Gong, 2024). However, inadequate communication or delayed responses from institutional authorities often lead to frustration and speculation (Fang & Fu, 2025). As these sentiments are expressed on social media, external media outlets amplify the discourse, escalating the situation into a public opinion crisis (Hu, 2024b; Zhu, 2022a). The rapid information flow in digital environments accelerates the dissemination of both accurate information and misinformation, complicating the crisis landscape and making institutional responses more challenging (Liu & Mehta, 2024).

Despite the growing relevance of public opinion crises, much of the existing literature remains centered on corporate contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how HEIs navigate these challenges, particularly within non-Western environments like China (Bujold, Parent-Rochelleau, & Gaudet, 2022; Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Stofberg, Bussin, & Mabaso, 2022). This study aims to contribute to a more nuanced

understanding of trust dynamics in academic governance under crisis conditions and provide practical insights for HEIs seeking to manage public opinion crises more effectively.

### **2.3 Organizational Trust**

Trust is essential for cultivating positive relationships within organizations, serving as a fundamental mechanism that shapes cooperative behaviors, mitigates uncertainties, and fosters long-term engagement (Borzino, Fatas, & Peterle, 2023; Shayo & Kakupa, 2021). Existing literature across disciplines such as anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology has provided a multitude of definitions, reflecting trust's inherently multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature (Borzino et al., 2023; Shayo & Kakupa, 2021). However, this disciplinary diversity, while enriching, has also resulted in fragmented conceptualizations that often lack integration when applied to complex organizational environments, especially during crisis situations (Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2021).

Several scholars have attempted to define trust from relational and psychological perspectives. Swanepoel and Saurombe (2022) described it as an unwritten psychological and emotional contract, while Heyns and Rothmann (2021) highlighted trust as a willingness to accept vulnerability, rooted in positive expectations of fair treatment. Keefer and Scartascini (2022) focused on confidence in others' integrity, dependability, and benevolence. Although these definitions vary in emphasis, they

share a common recognition of trust as a reciprocal and expectation-laden relationship (Koşar, 2020). Even so, these definitions primarily focus on interpersonal trust and often fall short in capturing the structural and systemic dimensions of organizational trust, particularly under conditions of external scrutiny and crisis.

Trust is an essential element at both the individual and organizational levels. Individual trust is shaped by personal behaviors and relationships, while organizational trust is influenced by the behaviors and relationships within the organization (Hancock et al., 2023). When extended to organizational contexts, trust transcends dyadic relationships and becomes embedded in institutional practices, governance processes, and stakeholder perceptions (Lee & Li, 2021; Srivastava & Mohaley, 2022). Organizational trust encompasses employees' positive expectations towards leadership behaviors, procedural justice, and adherence to ethical standards (Oguegbe & Edosomwan, 2021). While these studies effectively outline the attributes of organizational trust, many remain descriptive and do not provide a critical discussion of how trust operates dynamically during times of organizational vulnerability, such as public opinion crises.

The multidimensionality of trust is well-documented, with competence, integrity, and reliability emerging as core components across various studies (Alomran, Ahmed, & Kassem, 2024; Khawaja & Ahmed, 2021). Competence refers to an individual's capacity and proficiency in carrying out specific tasks (Khawaja & Ahmed, 2021).

Competence is a key factor in building trust. It encompasses a range of abilities, skills, and attributes that empower one party to have an influence in a specific domain (Feltman, 2024). When discussing workplace trust, particularly in relation to leaders, it pertains to their aptitude in effectively fulfilling tasks. This entails employees placing trust in leaders who they recognize as proficient and capable (Bashir, Rizvi, Chughtai, Paracha, & Jashari, 2020).

Integrity refers to the trustor's perception of the trustee's commitment to a set of reasonable principles (Feltman, 2024). This encompasses ethical standards, values, morals, and transparent communication. Upholding integrity can deter individuals from engaging in socially unacceptable behaviors (Svare, Gausdal, & Möllering, 2020). The extent to which parties prioritize the benefits of their project partners shapes these perceptions (Challender, Farrell, & McDermott, 2019).

Reliability refers to the consistent fulfillment of one's commitments. This entails keeping promises and ensuring that tasks are executed as communicated to others (Khawaja & Ahmed, 2021). Demonstrating reliability is essential for reinforcing dedication and encouraging positive behaviors and outcomes, particularly within the realm of leadership and management (Karatepe, Ozturk, & Kim, 2019).

However, much of the literature treats these components in isolation, neglecting the interplay between them, especially in crisis scenarios where failures in one dimension

(e.g., lack of transparency) can rapidly erode perceptions of overall competence and integrity (Adigwe, Olaniyi, Olagbaju, & Olaniyi, 2024; Janssen, Beerkens, & Van Der Vliet, 2021; Král & Schnackenberg, 2024).

The above information emphasizes the crucial role of establishing a high level of trust in fostering healthy and sustainable organizational relationships (Johannsen & Zak, 2021). Trust minimizes uncertainty, facilitating long-term planning within an organization. It also contributes significantly to enhancing both individual and organizational success, facilitating the organization to effectively adapt to change and ensure its continued existence (Koşar, 2020).

Upon reviewing the literature, it is apparent that organizations characterized by trust exhibit traits such as an open and engaged environment, shared responsibilities, a cohesive culture, a preference for teamwork, high job satisfaction, employee involvement in decision making, increased motivation, minimal conflict, reduced turnover, and an emphasis on creativity (Koşar, 2020; Michalec, Hargitai, & Bencsik, 2024; Tosun & Kibaroglu, 2023). Conversely, organizations lacking trust often showcase employee behaviors such as mistrust, defensive mechanisms, avoidance of responsibility, reluctance to share information, suspicion, jealousy, and non-compliance with organizational norms (Bozkus, 2023).

### **2.3.1 Previous Exploration on Organizational Trust**

Organizational trust has been a widely explored concept across disciplines, yet its empirical treatment tends to measure trust as a dependent variable, focusing on antecedents rather than consequences (Rahayuningsih, 2019; Yildiz, 2019). Schilke, Powell, and Schweitzer (2023) revealed that among 179 experimental studies, only 14 treated trust or trustworthiness as an independent variable, while the majority examined it as an outcome. This imbalance reflects a prevailing research orientation that prioritizes understanding what builds or diminishes trust, rather than how trust, once established, influences organizational dynamics. Such a trend underscores a significant gap: the causal mechanisms through which trust drives organizational outcomes remain under-theorized, limiting practical insights into leveraging trust for strategic management, especially in crisis contexts like public opinion crises in HEIs.

Koşar's (2020) review of organizational trust research in Turkey from 2000 to 2018 further illustrates the methodological narrowness of existing studies, which predominantly employ relationship screening models, simple random sampling, and conventional statistical tools such as t-tests and ANOVA. While such designs offer descriptive associations, they often fall short in uncovering complex, multi-layered trust dynamics, particularly in volatile environments where public opinion fluctuates rapidly. Schilke et al. (2023) argued for the greater application of experimental methods to disentangle the high endogeneity concerns associated with trust-performance relationships. This methodological gap is particularly pertinent for HEIs,

where trust dynamics are influenced by a web of organizational, cultural, and societal factors.

Beyond methodological critiques, scholars have sought to unpack the multi-dimensionality of trust. Alomran et al. (2024), for instance, examined trust as a moderating variable, analyzing how facets such as competence, reliability, transparency, and integrity influence organizational commitment. Their findings affirmed that trust is not a monolithic construct but a composite of distinct, context-sensitive dimensions. However, much of this research is rooted in corporate or hospitality sectors, leaving educational institutions, particularly HEIs, underexplored (Bozkus, 2023). This neglect is problematic given that HEIs are unique ecosystems where trust intersects with academic freedom, governance transparency, and stakeholder inclusivity.

Recent studies have expanded the lens to public governance and supply chain sectors. Mirzapour, Tootian Isfahan, Memarzadeh, and Hashemzadeh Khorasgani (2023) highlighted the role of open governance, focusing on information transparency and participatory decision-making, in fostering organizational trust within government institutions. Similarly, Assis, Lucas, and Rainho (2023) demonstrated how trust deficits in the agri-food supply chain hamper collaboration and innovation, especially during crisis periods. These findings, though sector-specific, reinforce a critical theme that trust thrives in environments of transparent communication and inclusive

participation, a principle that is equally relevant for HEIs managing public opinion crises.

In educational contexts, Yu and Chen's (2023) study during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that trust in school leadership significantly impacted the emotional well-being and job performance of mid-level leaders. Trust is not only a social lubricant, but also a psychological resource that enhances resilience during crises (Gillespie, Searle, Gustafsson, & Hailey, 2020). Similarly, Abbasi and Wan Ismail (2023) found that higher organizational trust in HEIs correlates with reduced deviant behaviors among staff, suggesting that trust functions as an informal control mechanism, fostering norm adherence even in environments with limited formal oversight.

Despite these insights, literature on trust within HEIs remains limited. Sezer and Uzun (2023) noted that most studies in Turkey focus on organizational culture, job satisfaction, and commitment, while trust is often treated tangentially (Cansoy, 2019; Çimen & Karadağ, 2021; Gün & Çoban, 2021). The absence of robust professional frameworks to protect lecturers' rights exacerbates this gap, impeding both job security and trust-building efforts. Hsieh, Li, Liang, and Chiu (2024) emphasized that social-emotional leadership positively influences lecturers' organizational trust and performance, yet such relational dimensions are seldom integrated into broader trust models within educational research.

Critically, a substantial body of trust research remains rooted in Western corporate or governmental settings, overlooking the socio-political and cultural specificities of non-Western HEIs (Sun, Yang, & De Jong, 2020; Zheng & Postiglione, 2024). Studies in China's higher education landscape, for instance, are scarce, often focusing on peripheral topics like organizational culture (Daneshmandnia, 2019) or knowledge sharing (Fauzi, 2022), without addressing how trust functions as a strategic asset in navigating public opinion crises. While concepts like organizational transparency and social responsibility are gaining traction (Laurett, Paço, & Mainardes, 2022), the role of trust as a mediator in institutional resilience during crises remains under-theorized.

Thus, existing literature lacks an integrated framework that captures the dynamic, context-specific nature of organizational trust in HEIs, particularly during public opinion crises (Ambarova, Zborovsky, & Shabrova, 2019; Gillies, de Quinto Schneider, & Nieuwoudt, 2025; Kosonen & Ikonen, 2019). This study aims to address this critical gap by examining how organizational trust is influenced by information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice in the context of China's HEIs. By doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of trust as a multi-dimensional, crisis-responsive construct, advancing both theory and practice in academic governance.

### **2.3.2 Organizational Trust in China's Higher Education Institutions**

While prior research has extensively linked organizational trust to outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, and performance, there is limited inquiry into how trust operates as a mediating or buffering mechanism during reputational threats arising from public opinion crises (Koşar, 2020; Oguebe & Edosomwan, 2021). This is a critical omission, as HEIs are increasingly subjected to public scrutiny where their responses are evaluated not only for procedural correctness, but also for their perceived authenticity and justice (Luvalo, Linake, & Ciske, 2025; Msosa, & Fuyane, 2020; Zheng & Postiglione, 2024).

Organizational trust within HEIs involves complex dynamics among various stakeholders, including lecturers, administrators, and students (Di Battista, Smith, Berti, & Pivetti, 2021; Lewicka, 2022; Luo, 2024). It is generally categorized into two dimensions: trust in the institution itself and trust in individuals, which can be further divided into vertical trust (trust in institutional authorities and supervisors) and horizontal trust (trust among colleagues and peers) (Lewicka, 2022). Trust in HEIs is reflected in the collective belief of the staff regarding the institution's prospects, its organizational environment, and the extent of perceived institutional support (Xiao & Luo, 2021).

Trust serves as a foundational element in fostering robust relationships across all organizational levels and is integral to achieving institutional objectives (Kmieciak, 2021). Within educational institutions, organizational trust facilitates knowledge

sharing, strengthens teamwork, enhances problem-solving capacity, and aligns shared values and goals (Abebe, 2021). Given that HEIs are inherently human-centered organizations, trust plays a vital role in ensuring smooth interactions, effective governance, and positive stakeholder engagement (Al-Subaie, 2021).

However, in China, research on organizational trust in HEIs has mainly focused on interpersonal trust between lecturers and students or among students, while research on lecturers' trust in their institutions remains limited (Lan, 2023; Dong & Ji, 2018). Trust deficits among lecturers often stem from inadequate institutional support, lack of participatory decision-making processes, and perceived inequities in promotion, salary, and academic recognition (Lewicka, 2022; Appuhamilage & Torii, 2019). These gaps in trust research are particularly concerning given that trust significantly influences key organizational variables such as job satisfaction, occupational well-being, turnover intention, and proactive organizational behaviors (Ai, Lei, Zhou, & Ma, 2023; Ji, 2023; Wang & Ying, 2022).

The context of public opinion crises adds another layer of complexity to organizational trust in HEIs. Public opinion crises in HEIs often stem from governance failures, ethical misconduct, or mishandling of sensitive incidents, which are amplified through digital media (Lang, 2022; Zhao, Xu, Wang, Wang, & Fan, 2023). In such crises, the institution's response becomes a critical determinant of whether stakeholder trust can be maintained or restored. Unfortunately, China's HEIs frequently exhibit deficiencies

in crisis communication, such as delayed information disclosure, lack of transparency, and exclusion of stakeholders from crisis management processes (Zheng, 2023b; Fang & Fu, 2025).

During public opinion crises, trust erosion manifests not only externally but also internally among lecturers (Alvesson & Szkuclarek, 2020; Westover, 2025). When HEIs fail to provide timely and transparent responses, lecturers may perceive the institution as lacking credibility and integrity, leading to reduced organizational identification and increased cynicism (Liu et al., 2024; Zhu, 2023). This internal trust deficit can exacerbate organizational inertia, diminish collaborative efforts, and foster a culture of disengagement, ultimately weakening the institution's ability to navigate the crisis effectively (Eaddy et al., 2025).

Research indicates that the resolution of public opinion crises does not rely on controlling narratives but on fostering authentic, transparent, and inclusive communication strategies (Lian, 2022; Zhu, 2023). HEIs must prioritize proactive information disclosure, ensure procedural justice, and engage lecturers and students in decision-making processes to rebuild trust. Institutions that demonstrate openness, acknowledge accountability, and address stakeholder concerns with sincerity are more likely to restore their credibility and mitigate reputational damage (Kosonen & Ikonen, 2019).

Furthermore, organizational trust during crises is influenced by both cognitive and affective dimensions (Gustafsson, Gillespie, Searle, Hope Hailey, & Dietz, 2020; Khouya, & Benabdelhadi, 2021). Cognitive trust is based on the perceived competence and reliability of the institution, whereas affective trust stems from emotional bonds, care, and mutual respect (Shayo et al., 2021; Waskito & Linansya, 2023). In crisis contexts, HEIs must simultaneously reinforce their technical competence through effective problem resolution and nurture emotional trust by showing empathy and responsiveness towards stakeholders (Rudolph, Crawford, Sam, & Tan, 2024; Schoenfeld, 2020).

Several scholars have proposed multidimensional frameworks for evaluating trust within HEIs, typically distinguishing trust in senior management, immediate supervisors, and colleagues (Al-Subaie, 2021). Trust in senior management is closely tied to fair decision-making, transparent communication, and institutional support; trust in immediate supervisors revolves around professional competence and ethical leadership; while trust among colleagues is built on mutual support and information sharing (Hendriks, Burger, Rijsenbilt, Pleeging, & Commandeur, 2020; Raatikainen et al., 2023). During public opinion crises, these layers of trust become deeply interwoven, as failures in top-level governance can cascade down and erode trust at every level, while strong peer-level trust can serve as a buffer, sustaining operational cohesion amidst external reputational challenges (Chi et al., 2021; Yorulmaz et al., 2021).

Despite an extensive body of literature on organizational trust, very few had examined how trust in China's HEIs affects lecturers during crisis situations (Jiang et al., 2025; Steinhardt & Delhey, 2025; Wu, Gong, & Shi, 2024). Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by synthesizing existing research across these domains, aiming to develop a more holistic understanding of trust dynamics within HEIs under reputational threat. By focusing on lecturers' perspectives, the study contributes to a more grounded and context-sensitive model of organizational trust rebuilding, emphasizing the mediating roles of perceived authenticity and organizational justice in the transparency-trust relationship.

#### **2.4 Information Transparency**

Information transparency, as a fundamental concept in organizational studies, has garnered increasing attention across diverse fields such as corporate governance, marketing, public administration, and higher education (Chauke & Thusi, 2023; Raimo, Vitolla, Marrone, & Esposito, 2025; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). While its importance is widely acknowledged, the definition and application of transparency vary significantly depending on stakeholders' expectations, sectorial contexts, and sociocultural environments (Schäfer, 2023). In today's digital era, the proliferation of information channels has heightened individuals' awareness of their rights, intensifying demands for greater openness, accuracy, and accountability in information disclosure (Zakaria et al., 2021). Consequently, transparency is no longer

a passive organizational attribute but a dynamic capability that shapes stakeholder perceptions and organizational legitimacy.

Transparency is often used interchangeably with terms such as ‘openness’ or ‘visibility’; however, these concepts are not identical (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). Visibility pertains to the sociological aspect of being seen or perceived, which is often linked to power dynamics (Treem, Leonardi, & Van den Hooff, 2020). It focuses on whether information can be found, while transparency emphasizes whether information can be understood and trusted (Petelka et al., 2020). Transparency, by contrast, requires not only the availability of information but also the ability for stakeholders to interpret and utilize it effectively (Wamprechtsamer, 2023).

Tomlinson and Schnackenberg (2022) provided a comprehensive definition of information transparency as the “perceived quality of consciously shared information”, highlighting three core dimensions: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. This tripartite model has been widely accepted in transparency research, serving as a fundamental framework for evaluating transparency practices across various organizational contexts.

Disclosure refers to the extent to which stakeholders are granted access to relevant and comprehensive information (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). It is the act of making information available proactively, allowing recipients to be informed about

decisions, policies, procedures, and outcomes (Schnackenberg et al., 2021; Kolotylo-Kulkarni, Xia, & Dhillon, 2021). Disclosure is often perceived as a primary indicator of an organization's openness and willingness to be held accountable.

Clarity pertains to how understandable and interpretable the information is for stakeholders (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). Information must be communicated in a way that is free from jargon, technical complexity, or ambiguity, ensuring that recipients can easily grasp its meaning (Galaitis et al., 2021; Hansson et al., 2020). Clarity involves not only simplifying language, but also using effective communication strategies such as summaries, visual aids, and interactive dialogues to enhance comprehension.

Accuracy emphasizes the precision and truthfulness of the disseminated information (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). Accurate information reflects reality without distortion, exaggeration, or bias, which is essential for building stakeholder trust and confidence (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Schnackenberg et al., 2021). Providing stakeholders with verifiable facts and unbiased explanations is critical in fostering a transparent organizational culture.

These three dimensions are interdependent; disclosure without clarity or accuracy may lead to misinformation, while clarity without full disclosure can result in selective

transparency. Thus, achieving genuine information transparency requires a balanced integration of all three aspects (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022).

Furthermore, transparency is inherently a relational concept, where the perceived level of transparency varies depending on the stakeholders' expectations, information needs, and contextual factors (Hossiep, Märtins, & Schewe, 2024). As organizations navigate complex environments, the quality of information shared becomes more critical than the sheer quantity. An overemphasis on information volume, without attention to its relevance and interpretability, may overwhelm stakeholders and obscure key messages (Märtins, Westmattelmann, & Schewe, 2023).

With this theoretical foundation established, the following sub-sequence sections will delve into the evolution of information transparency research and examine the current state of information transparency practices within China's HEIs.

#### **2.4.1 Previous Exploration on Information Transparency**

Previous research on information transparency predominantly revolved around corporate practices, focusing on areas such as green branding (Maretha, 2023; Sansome, Wilkie, & Conduit, 2024), marketing communications (Cambier & Poncin, 2020), and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Lee & Nam, 2021). These studies emphasized transparency as a strategic tool to foster consumer trust and brand loyalty. Similarly, in the hospitality industry, transparency has been explored in relation

to relational leadership and service authenticity (Akhoondnejad, Rosin, & Brennan, 2022; Busser & Shulga, 2019). Despite sector-specific nuances, these applications commonly interpret transparency as a mechanism for enhancing organizational reputation and stakeholder engagement.

The concept of information transparency has evolved from a normative ideal to a critical organizational practice that shapes stakeholder relationships, governance effectiveness, and public perception. Early studies predominantly focused on the role of transparency in enhancing decision-making within public institutions, emphasizing its capacity to improve public services and elevate trust in governance structures (Bauhr & Carlitz, 2020; Khosrowjerdi, 2022). In the context of global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars like Annaka (2021) and Arora et al. (2020) highlighted the indispensable role of timely and accurate information dissemination in enabling societies to respond effectively to emergent threats. These findings underscore transparency not merely as a communicative act, but also as a determinant of institutional resilience and public trust.

Subsequent research expanded the scope of transparency from public administration to corporate governance and organizational management. Scholars emphasized that transparency serves as a strategic mechanism to reduce information asymmetry, enhance organizational legitimacy, and strengthen stakeholder engagement (Kucherova, Didenko, Kravets, Honcharenko, & Uchitel, 2020; Zakaria et al., 2021).

Specifically, providing stakeholders with comprehensive access to information regarding corporate operations, management practices, and ownership structures is seen as a prerequisite for fostering informed collaboration and trust (Xia, Hou, Huang, Liu, & Ding, 2023). In this regard, transparency has been framed as a resource that organizations leverage to shape positive stakeholder attitudes and perceptions of credibility (Holland, Seltzer, & Kochigina, 2021).

Nevertheless, the extant literature has also revealed critical tensions and paradoxes surrounding information transparency (Erkkilä, 2020). On one hand, transparency is lauded for promoting accountability and facilitating informed decision-making. On the other, excessive or unfiltered transparency can generate unintended negative consequences (Janning, Khelif, & Ingley, 2020; Schnell, 2023). Hofmann and Strobel (2020) demonstrated that overexposure of internal information may trigger discomfort among organizational members, erode their sense of autonomy, and exacerbate internal competitive pressures. This paradox challenges the assumption that “more transparency is inherently better”, calling for a nuanced understanding of transparency’s scope, purpose, and audience-specific calibration (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020)

Moreover, traditional transparency models have often focused on external transparency, such as public disclosures aimed at enhancing corporate image and competitiveness (Liu, Li, & Lin, 2022; Tang, 2024). However, recent studies advocate

for a more holistic approach that encompasses internal transparency, emphasizing its pivotal role in cultivating trust and cooperation within organizations (Kucherova et al., 2020). Stuckey (2024) particularly pointed out the research gap in understanding how transparency influences internal stakeholders, such as employees, compared to the extensive focus on external public perception. This shift draws attention to internal information dynamics, such as how transparency affects organizational culture, psychological safety, and employee trust.

Public relations literature further critiques the simplistic notion that transparency equates to full disclosure or the mere amplification of information flow (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Rawlins, 2009). Effective transparency is not about volume but clarity, relevance, and contextual framing. The emphasis is shifting from 'what is shared' to 'how it is shared and perceived'. Rajabiyazdi (2023) highlighted that transparency must fulfill stakeholders' informational needs through authentic, valuable, and balanced communication processes that foster informed and responsible decision-making (Lee, 2023; Rawlins, 2008).

In summary, while information transparency is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of good governance and stakeholder trust, its application is fraught with contextual complexities, stakeholder-specific expectations, and potential unintended consequences (Bamberger & Alterman, 2023; Erkkilä, 2020; Ripamonti, 2024). The current literature calls for a more nuanced and integrative approach to transparency,

particularly emphasizing the internal dynamics within organizations and sector-specific transparency frameworks, which remain underexplored in the context of HEIs.

#### **2.4.2 Information Transparency in China's Higher Education Institutions**

While research on information transparency has predominantly focused on profit-driven enterprises (ElKelish, Hussain, Al Mahameed, & Irsyadillah, 2024; Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Yang et al., 2023), the growing emphasis on new public management and digital governance has gradually extended scholarly attention to HEIs (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020). Public scandals involving corruption and administrative inefficiency in the public sector have intensified stakeholders' demands for improved transparency (García-Sánchez, Raimo, Marrone, & Vitolla, 2020; Salvi, Raimo, Petruzzella, & Vitolla, 2022), prompting governments to introduce regulatory frameworks aimed at enhancing transparency across public institutions. These regulatory shifts equally impact HEIs, as they are integral to public service delivery (Rella, Marrone, Raimo, & Vitolla, 2022).

In HEIs, information transparency pertains not only to external accountability but also to the internal governance processes that ensure fair treatment of lecturers, students, and staff (Zhang & Hu, 2022). Transparency regarding institutional structure, resource allocation, and academic performance is crucial for fostering stakeholder trust and maintaining the institution's credibility (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2019). Transparent information dissemination also helps mitigate social and environmental

pressures by enhancing institutional responsiveness to public concerns (Rella et al., 2022). Furthermore, detailed data on faculty composition, enrollment statistics, and financial operations enable both internal and external stakeholders to make informed judgments regarding the institution's management (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020).

However, information transparency practices among China's HEIs remain inconsistent. Studies revealed that critical information, such as enrollment plans and financial disclosures, often lacks comprehensiveness or is only partially disclosed to the public (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2019). For instance, Zeng (2021) found that a significant proportion of HEIs failed to publish budget-related data, with 227 out of 343 institutions in three provinces not disclosing financial reports (Peng, 2020). Such passive disclosure practices and the absence of proactive information management strategies have severely undermined efforts to build trust and accountability within the sector (Zeng, 2021).

Additionally, the tendency of some HEIs to treat transparency as a compliance formality rather than a strategic governance tool exacerbates information asymmetry between institutions and their stakeholders (Gonsalves & Lin, 2024; Pattaro, Moura e Sá, & de Kruijf, 2022). Publicly accessible information is often limited to basic operational facts, while more sensitive or controversial issues such as faculty recruitment policies, research funding allocations, or internal decision-making

procedures are frequently concealed behind layers of bureaucratic opacity (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2019).

The challenges of improving transparency in HEIs are further compounded by the lack of standardized information disclosure mechanisms (Al-Fathi, Al-Hidabi, Al-Ani, & Souad, 2021; Kucherova, Honcharenko, & Los, 2021). Currently, there is no unified framework governing the depth, frequency, or format of information released by China's HEIs, leading to significant variability in transparency practices across institutions. This fragmentation not only diminishes the comparability of institutional performance but also hampers efforts to establish sector-wide trust and accountability (Zeng, 2021).

Enhancing information transparency within HEIs requires a shift from passive compliance to active disclosure strategies that prioritize the needs and expectations of stakeholders (McNicol, Carthouser, Bongiovanni, & Abeysooriya, 2023; Pattaro et al., 2022). This includes making essential data accessible in a timely, accurate, and user-friendly manner (Kucherova et al., 2021). HEIs should utilize diversified communication channels, including official websites, social media platforms, and open data portals, to disseminate comprehensive information encompassing both operational metrics and strategic objectives (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Zakaria et al., 2021).

Ultimately, fostering a transparent organizational culture within HEIs is vital for ensuring academic integrity, promoting internal governance efficiency, and reinforcing public trust (Adeusi, Jejeniwa, & Jejeniwa, 2024; Niwagaba, 2025). Addressing the current gaps in transparency practices is not only a prerequisite for institutional legitimacy but also a strategic imperative in the context of China's broader higher education reforms and societal expectations for accountability.

#### **2.4.3 Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust during Public Opinion Crises in China's Higher Education Institutions**

A substantial body of research has confirmed the positive relationship between information transparency and organizational trust (Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Hossiep et al., 2024; Lee & Li, 2021; Schnackenberg et al., 2021; Stuckey, 2024). Transparency facilitates stakeholders' understanding of organizational actions, reduces uncertainty, and fosters trust, particularly during crises when the demand for credible and timely information intensifies (Waters & D'Urso, 2021; Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Waters and D'Urso (2021) emphasized that in the context of a crisis, achieving actionable transparency through detailed disclosure and public visibility is essential to alleviate suspicion and maintain public order. Failure to disclose relevant information may erode trust, hinder crisis response effectiveness, and escalate public dissatisfaction. Similarly, Tomlinson and Schnackenberg (2022) argued that

transparency is pivotal in rebuilding trust following organizational scandals, underlining its restorative role in stakeholder relationships.

Public opinion crises present unique challenges to trust-building in HEIs, where trust in governance is intertwined with transparent information flow (Gillies et al., 2025; Zou, 2023). Læg Reid and Rykkja (2019) linked effective crisis management to civic trust, noting that transparency can serve as a mechanism to restore eroded confidence. Enria et al. (2021) further demonstrated that transparent communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial in shaping public perceptions of government competence and integrity, highlighting the reciprocal reinforcement between transparency and trust.

In organizational settings, transparent communication strategies, such as open disclosures, timely clarifications, and consistent messaging, have been shown to enhance trust in leadership (Caputo, Pizzi, Ligorio, & Leopizzi, 2021; Lee et al., 2023). Moreover, social media platforms have emerged as critical channels for fostering transparency and engaging the public, allowing institutions to counter misinformation and maintain public confidence during crises (Luo & Harrison, 2021; Zheng, 2023a).

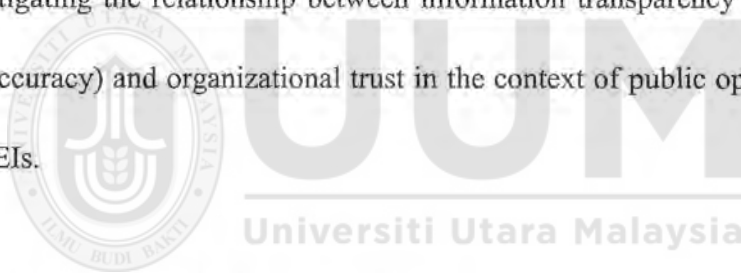
In the context of China's HEIs, transparency practices remain inadequate, particularly regarding timely and comprehensive information disclosure (Zhao, 2022). Issues such as fragmented information release, delayed responses, and selective disclosure have

impeded efforts to build public trust, especially during public opinion crises (Waters, & D'Urso, 2021; Whyte, 2025). Zhang and Hu (2022) observed that clear and accessible institutional policies can significantly enhance faculty trust, while ambiguous governance practices often fuel rumors and distrust.

Despite the recognized importance of transparency in fostering organizational trust, existing research predominantly focuses on for-profit organizations or public administration, with limited attention given to the higher education sector in China (Postiglione, 2020; Tao, 2020; Zeng, 2024). Previous studies often conceptualize transparency in a singular dimension, overlooking its multidimensional nature comprising disclosure, clarity, and accuracy (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). Understanding how these specific dimensions influence trust during public opinion crises in HEIs remains an underexplored area.

Given the growing pressures faced by China's HEIs to manage public perception and maintain institutional credibility, it is crucial to examine how information transparency can serve as a strategic tool for trust-building (Acquaye, 2020). Transparency not only alleviates public skepticism but also promotes accountability, facilitates stakeholder participation, and strengthens confidence in organizational processes (Bellantoni et al., 2020; Cole, Baker, & Stivas, 2021).

The above literature review discusses existing research on the connection between information transparency and organizational trust, clarifying that information transparency in organizational environment is related to trust (Alessandro, Lagomarsino, Scartascini, Streb, & Torrealday, 2021; Bellantoni et al., 2020; Borzino et al., 2023; Cole et al., 2021; Enria et al., 2021; Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Hossiep et al., 2024; Læg Reid & Rykkja, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Li & Li, 2023; Schnackenberg et al., 2021; Stuckey, 2024; Yang & Battocchio, 2021; Zheng, 2023a). Therefore, organizations and decision makers must rigorously assess and effectively monitor the perceived level of information transparency. This study addresses the existing research gap by investigating the relationship between information transparency (disclosure, clarity, and accuracy) and organizational trust in the context of public opinion crises in China's HEIs.



Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1a: There is a significant relationship between information disclosure and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1b: There is a significant relationship between information clarity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1c: There is a significant relationship between information accuracy and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

## 2.5 Perceived Authenticity

The term authenticity originates from the Greek word *authentikos*, signifying genuineness and realism (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Despite its widespread application across academic disciplines, defining authenticity remains challenging due to its subjective and multifaceted nature (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, 2019; Lehman et al., 2019). Consequently, its conceptualization varies across fields such as philosophy (ten Have, & Patrão Neves, 2021), psychology (Lehman et al., 2019), marketing (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020), and public relations (Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024).

Across these disciplines, authenticity is commonly characterized by alignment between internal values and external expressions (Benedetti, Rondi, Kotlar, & Massis, 2020; Hewlin, Karelaia, Kouchaki, & Sedikides, 2020). It refers to the extent to which individuals or organizations act consistently with their core beliefs, demonstrating sincerity, transparency, and moral intent in their actions and communications (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin et al., 2020; Lehman et al., 2019; Sahin & Burnaz, 2020). From a psychological perspective, authenticity reflects “being true to oneself”, manifesting through behaviors that resonate with one’s inner emotions and beliefs (Hopwood et al., 2021).

In the realm of public relations and organizational communication, perceived authenticity is defined as the public’s subjective evaluation of an organization’s

genuineness, based on the alignment between its stated values and actual behaviors (Hagelstein, Einwiller, & Zerfass, 2021). Transparency, honesty, and consistency are frequently cited as key indicators that shape perceptions of authenticity (Lee & Li, 2021; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Saffran, Hu, Hinnant, Scherer, and Nagel (2020) further emphasized that perceived authenticity arises when messages are seen as reflective of the sender's unique values, history, and viewpoints.

Perceived authenticity is influenced by the recipients' cognitive schemas, stereotypes, and prior experiences (Lee, 2020). When an organization's actions meet public expectations and align with their cognitive frames, perceived authenticity is enhanced. Conversely, inconsistencies or discrepancies between declared values and actual behaviors can diminish perceptions of authenticity (Jin, Mitson, Qin, Vielledent, & Men, 2023).

Previous literature underscores the significance of authenticity in enhancing organizational identity and trust, particularly in marketing and public relations contexts (Johansen & Gregersen, 2024; Rees, 2020). Authentic brands distinguish themselves by embodying qualities such as sincerity, credibility, consistency, and moral integrity, rather than being perceived as driven by mere commercial interests (Baytar, 2021; Kapitan, van Esch, Soma, & Kietzmann, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022). In this sense, authenticity becomes a strategic asset that reinforces an organization's legitimacy and trustworthiness.

Within public relations ethics, authenticity is regarded as a foundational principle, encompassing both ethical and managerial dimensions (Rees, 2020). From an ethical perspective, authenticity involves making decisions that reflect the organization's true values, independent of external pressures (Boone, Buyl, Declerck, & Sajko, 2022). Managerially, it relates to existential authenticity by ensuring that communication practices align with the organization's self-concept and mission (Neill, 2021; Newman, 2019; Rees, 2020).

Thus, in the context of organizational communication, authenticity transcends mere truthfulness; it entails consistently upholding and expressing the organization's values and beliefs through transparent and sincere communication practices (Nunes, Ordanini, & Giambastiani, 2021; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Effective authenticity management, therefore, requires not only accurate information dissemination but also genuine moral intent and value alignment in all communicative actions (Hewlin et al., 2020; Lim & Jiang, 2021).

### **2.5.1 Previous Exploration on Perceived Authenticity**

Perceived authenticity has garnered increasing attention across diverse research fields, with scholars examining it from various perspectives. In contemporary markets, authenticity is recognized as a crucial determinant of consumer behavior (Baghel, 2024; Prajapati, 2025). Sidali, Capitello, and Manurung (2021) found a direct causal link between authenticity and consumption patterns, revealing that German consumers'

willingness to purchase is significantly influenced by their perception of product authenticity. Their study emphasized that consumers' subjective identification with a product enhances its perceived authenticity, particularly within the food sector.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) research has similarly highlighted the pivotal role of authenticity in shaping consumer evaluations. Sahin and Burnaz (2020) developed a comprehensive model delineating multiple dimensions of perceived authenticity in CSR contexts, including consistency, commitment, candor, community connection, creativity, and consumer engagement. Their findings indicate that perceptions of CSR initiatives are profoundly affected by how authentic, transparent, people-oriented, and consistent the organization's actions appear. Likewise, Jeon and An (2019) confirmed that perceived authenticity can positively impact consumer attitudes towards CSR activities, while egoistic motives such as overt cause propaganda can undermine the sincerity of such initiatives. Afzali and Kim (2021) further argued that businesses must address societal needs through stable, transparent, and value-driven practices to cultivate authenticity in the eyes of stakeholders.

Although substantial research has examined authenticity in marketing and CSR contexts, investigations into perceived authenticity in education, particularly in HEIs, remain limited (Camilleri, 2020; Lubinga, Ramnarain, & Tonkin, 2023). Matenga, Zulu, Corbin, and Mweemba (2021) pointed out that power asymmetries within academic environments complicate efforts to achieve communicative authenticity, as

imbalances may foster perceptions of condescension or insincerity. Saffran et al. (2020) argued that the credibility of a communicator is evaluated through the lens of shared values, organizational affiliations, and socio-political contexts. Audiences assess not only the communicator's expertise, but also the alignment of messages with their own beliefs and experiences, making authenticity a dynamic and context-dependent construct.

Emerging literature conceptualizes authenticity as a multidimensional perception, heavily influenced by context and audience-specific factors (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Lim and Jiang (2021) explored the intersection of transparency, credibility, and authenticity in moral public relations, emphasizing their intertwined influence on perceived authenticity. Similarly, Stiers et al. (2021) identified six critical attributes, that is transparency, boldness, consistency, firmness, honesty, and truthfulness, which collectively shape the perception of authenticity in organizational communications.

Lee (2020) conceptualized perceived authenticity through three interrelated dimensions: source authenticity, which reflects the genuineness, sincerity, and value alignment of the communicator; message authenticity, referring to how well the message content aligns with recipients' expectations and beliefs; and interaction authenticity, which emphasizes active and genuine audience engagement in the communication process. These dimensions collectively shape perceptions of

authenticity, while factors such as spontaneity, communication medium, and transparency further influence audience judgments (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

While research on perceived authenticity has advanced in fields such as branding, advertising, and celebrity endorsements, there is a notable paucity of studies examining authenticity perceptions within HEIs (Baghel, 2024; Becker, Wiegand, & Reinartz, 2019; Rees, 2020). Given that HEIs operate as knowledge-driven organizations reliant on trust and credibility, understanding how lecturers perceive the authenticity of institutional communication is vital (Girardin, Blal, & Lunardo, 2023; van Vuuren, 2024). However, current literature has not sufficiently addressed this perspective, particularly in the context of public opinion crises (Zou, 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring how lecturers in China's HEIs perceive the authenticity of information transparency efforts, contributing to a deeper understanding of authenticity within academic institutions.

### **2.5.2 Perceived Authenticity in China's Higher Education Institutions**

Perceived authenticity within China's HEIs has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, given its critical role in shaping stakeholder perceptions and institutional reputation (Girardin et al., 2024). Existing studies suggest that authenticity in HEIs is a multifaceted construct, encompassing dimensions such as educational quality, leadership credibility, cultural integrity, and technological integration (Girardin et al., 2024; Shen, Liu, Wan, Shi, & Liu, 2023). While extensive

literature has explored authenticity in consumer-brand relationships (Abhinandan, 2020; Jeon & An, 2019; Liu et al., 2021b; Um, 2022), its application within organizational contexts, particularly in China's HEIs, remains underexplored (Zheng & Postiglione, 2024).

In China's higher education sector, perceived authenticity has become a pressing issue as HEIs navigate the dual pressures of marketization and intensified public scrutiny (Postiglione, 2020; Xia et al., 2023). With the rise of social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, HEIs are increasingly exposed to public opinion crises arising from incidents like academic misconduct, administrative opacity, and mishandling of sensitive events (Zhao et al., 2023). These crises often reveal gaps between institutional rhetoric (e.g., commitment to academic integrity, student-centered values) and actual practices, thereby undermining stakeholder perceptions of authenticity (Lang, 2022).

Research has indicated that perceived authenticity within HEIs is critically shaped by the institution's communication behavior, especially during crises (Plust et al., 2021). China's HEIs have been criticized for employing perfunctory, vague, or overly bureaucratic responses, which erode stakeholders' trust and intensify skepticism regarding institutional sincerity (Zheng, 2023b; Lian, 2022). As noted by Liu et al. (2024), authenticity is not merely about information disclosure but also about conveying consistency between expressed values and observable actions.

Furthermore, the hierarchical governance structure of China's HEIs often results in top-down decision-making processes that marginalize faculty participation, leading to perceptions of inauthentic engagement (Fang & Fu, 2025). Lecturers frequently perceive a disconnect between institutional slogans promoting 'academic freedom' and the restrictive administrative practices that limit their autonomy and voice (Dong & Ji, 2018). Such incongruence has been found to negatively affect lecturers' organizational identification and willingness to engage in proactive organizational behaviors (Xiao & Luo, 2021).

A study by Yang and Battocchio (2021) revealed that perceived authenticity among lecturers is significantly influenced by the transparency of internal communication channels and the extent to which faculty input is genuinely considered in institutional decision-making. Similarly, Erickson (2021) emphasized that lecturers' perception of institutional authenticity is heightened when HEIs demonstrate consistency between crisis communication rhetoric and substantive remedial actions.

Technological advancements further shape perceptions of authenticity within China's HEIs. With the growing adoption of AI-driven tools such as chatbots and generative AI platforms, perceptions of technological authenticity, defined by transparency, reliability, and trustworthiness, are central to user acceptance (Zhang et al., 2025). These studies suggest that the perceived authenticity of technological applications

mediates stakeholders' trust in institutional innovation and digital transformation efforts.

Cultural and linguistic factors also play a significant role in influencing perceived authenticity (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Rivera et al., 2019). Research on language teachers' attitudes towards ICT integration has shown that cultural values, combined with institutional support, directly affect perceptions of authenticity in teaching practices (Lan, 2024). This finding underscores the importance of aligning technological integration with cultural and pedagogical expectations to maintain authenticity in educational delivery.

Additionally, institutional branding strategies contribute to shaping perceptions of authenticity (Adhim et al., 2025; Xia, 2023; Yu, 2025). Efforts to project a distinctive and credible institutional identity, particularly in transnational contexts, have been found to enhance stakeholder confidence and reinforce the global reputation of China's HEIs (Chen & Libo-On, 2025). Authentic branding, therefore, becomes a strategic tool in reinforcing perceptions of educational quality and institutional integrity.

In summary, perceived authenticity of China's HEIs is a complex and dynamic construct, and cultivating authentic, trustworthy, and culturally resonant educational experiences is critical to enhancing stakeholder perceptions and strengthening institutional credibility (Erickson, 2021; Long et al., 2024). Despite growing interest

in HEIs within the academic community, research on the internal perceptions of authenticity within China's HEIs, particularly from the perspective of lecturers and in the context of public opinion crises, remains limited, highlighting key areas for further study.

### **2.5.3 The Mediation Role of Perceived Authenticity**

The association between information transparency and perceived authenticity has received limited scholarly attention, yet emerging studies indicate a positive linkage between the two constructs (Busser & Shulga, 2019; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Transparency is not only fundamental to fostering authenticity, but also essential in establishing and restoring trust among stakeholders (Busser & Shulga, 2019). Yang and Battocchio (2021) further emphasized that transparency underpins authenticity, influencing stakeholder engagement and trust. Hofmann and Strobel (2020) highlighted that organizational transparency enhances member satisfaction by providing feedback and fostering perceived authenticity. Transparent communication enables audiences to perceive an organization as authentic, contingent upon the content's consistency with reality (Wamprechtsamer, 2023; Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Perceived authenticity has been identified as a crucial factor in cultivating trust and strengthening organization-public relationships (Lim et al., 2022; Lim & Jiang, 2021). Lee (2023) demonstrated that public perception of an organization's authenticity

positively correlates with organizational trust, whereas inauthentic promotion strategies erode stakeholder confidence (Reck et al., 2022).

In advertising and CSR contexts, perceived authenticity significantly influences consumer trust, enhances information credibility, and fosters brand loyalty (Abhinandan, 2020; Jeon & An, 2019; Liu et al., 2021a; Um, 2022). Authentic CSR efforts, when aligned with organizational values and societal commitments, are more likely to engender public trust (Jeon & An, 2019; Lee, 2023; Lim & Jiang, 2021). Moreover, both transparency and authenticity synergistically reinforce stakeholders' perceptions of trustworthiness (Sahin & Burnaz, 2020).

Digital communication studies further underscore the interdependence between information transparency and authenticity (Sansome et al., 2024; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Transparent messaging forms the foundation for factual accuracy, while authenticity imbues these facts with emotional resonance, collectively establishing trust (Busser & Shulga, 2019). Yang and Battocchio (2021) found that brands engaging in transparent disclosures are perceived as more authentic, which in turn enhances consumer trust, positive attitudes, and behavioral intentions. This relationship is especially significant for established brands aiming to reinforce their identity through transparent and authentic communication strategies.

Additionally, Lim and Jiang (2021) argued that perceived authenticity exerts a stronger influence on organizational trust than transparency alone. While transparency shapes initial perceptions, audiences assess authenticity based on message content and sincerity. If communication lacks authenticity, transparency efforts may be rendered ineffective, further intensifying public skepticism (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Despite growing interest, most existing research focuses on corporate and marketing contexts, with limited exploration into how perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust within HEIs, particularly during public opinion crises (Holland et al., 2021; Zheng, 2023a). The unique dynamics of HEIs, especially in China, necessitate a focused investigation into how transparency practices influence lecturers' perceptions of authenticity and, subsequently, their trust in institutional governance (Niwagaba, 2025; Gillespie et al., 2020).

Drawing from the literature, it is evident that information transparency enhances perceived authenticity (Busser & Shulga, 2019; Yang & Battocchio, 2021), which in turn fosters organizational trust (Lee, 2023; Lim & Jiang, 2021). However, research integrating these variables within the multidimensional transparency framework, including clarity, disclosure, and accuracy, remains scarce, particularly in the context of China's HEIs amidst public opinion crises.

Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and perceived authenticity during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H3: There is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

## **2.6 Organizational Justice**

Organizational justice pertains to individuals' perceptions of fairness within organizational contexts, encompassing the legitimacy of decisions, fairness of actions, and their relevance in specific situations (Donglong, Taejun, Julie, & Sanghun, 2020). Greenberg (2011) first conceptualized organizational justice as individuals' subjective judgments regarding justice in organizational settings, where members form perceptions and emotions based on how they and others are treated (Jehanzeb & Mohanty, 2020; Purwanto, 2020).

Sun (2020) emphasized that organizational justice reflects individuals' subjective evaluation of their employment relationship, incorporating personal feelings and cognitive assessments of fairness in organizational practices. Khaola and Rambe (2021) extended this perspective, defining organizational justice as employees' perceptions

of fairness concerning outcomes, resource distribution, decision-making procedures, and interpersonal interactions, including access to accurate information.

Given its inherently subjective nature, perceptions of justice vary across individuals, influencing workplace attitudes and behaviors (Li, 2020). The presence of justice fosters employees' sense of respect, value, and belonging, which directly impacts their relationship with the organization (Bashir, Memon, & Muenjohn, 2024; Snyman, Coetzee, & Ferreira, 2023). Organizational justice thus plays a vital role in enhancing employee satisfaction, strengthening employer-employee relations, and promoting positive organizational behavior (Sun, 2020).

Organizational justice is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct comprising three core dimensions: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Greenberg, 2017). Distributive justice refers to perceived justice in the allocation of organizational resources relative to individuals' contributions and expectations (Na'imah et al., 2023; Yorulmaz et al., 2021). Li (2020) noted that perceived distributive justice arises when outcomes align with employees' expectations, whereas perceived inequalities can evoke negative emotional responses such as guilt or frustration. Despite its importance, absolute distributive justice remains challenging in practice, as perceptions are influenced by equity, equality, and need-based distribution principles (Igliozzi, Granot, & Ottati, 2024; Ogbujah, 2021; Tisch & Gutfleisch, 2022).

Procedural justice pertains to the fairness of the processes and procedures used in decision-making and their implementation (Na'imah et al., 2023). It emphasizes the consistency, neutrality, accuracy, and correctability of organizational procedures, shaping employees' perceptions of institutional legitimacy (Greenberg, 2017; Hartner-Tiefenthaler, Nienaber, & Yanagida, 2023). Employees' sense of participation and influence over decision-making processes further amplifies their perception of procedural justice (Sun, 2020).

Interactional justice focuses on the fairness of interpersonal treatment and the quality of communication within organizational interactions (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2013). It involves treating employees with respect and dignity, providing honest and accurate information, and offering clear explanations regarding decisions and their outcomes (Hadi, Tjahjono, & Palupi, 2020; Van Dijke, Gobena, & Verboon, 2019). Interactional justice is instrumental in shaping how employees evaluate leadership behaviors, fostering a respectful organizational microenvironment, and enhancing cohesion (Sun, 2020).

Interactional justice is further divided into interpersonal justice and informational justice (Mengstie, 2020). Interpersonal justice addresses the degree to which individuals feel respected and valued in their interactions, reflecting the courtesy, dignity, and fairness exhibited by decision-makers (Zayer & Benabdelhadi, 2020). Informational justice, on the other hand, concerns the adequacy, transparency, and

timeliness of information shared with employees regarding decisions and actions (Colquitt, 2001). It encompasses the specificity and truthfulness of explanations, ensuring employees understand the rationale behind organizational decisions and procedures (Zayer & Benabdelhadi, 2020).

In summary, organizational justice encapsulates the perceived justice of outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal treatment within organizations (Ho, 2024). It significantly influences employees' attitudes, behaviors, and the overall quality of organizational relationships (Ho, 2024; Lee & Rhee, 2023).

### **2.6.1 Previous Exploration on Organizational Justice**

Organizational justice has been extensively explored across disciplines such as organizational psychology (Cachon-Alonso & Elovainio, 2022; Rana & Singh, 2021), human resource management (Baloch, Iqbal, Ikramullah, Van Prooijen, & Khan, 2021), and organizational behavior (Shimamura, Fukutake, Namba, & Ogino, 2021; Liu, Cheng, & Ouyang, 2021b). While this has led to a rich body of literature, much of the research has focused on workplace outcomes in commercial settings, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and citizenship behavior (Abdullah & Al-Abrow, 2023; Adamovic, 2023). However, despite this volume, the applicability of these findings in non-profit, knowledge-based institutions like HEIs remains underexplored.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that justice perceptions significantly influence employees' attitudes and behaviors (Al Halbusi, Williams, Mansoor, Hassan, & Hamid, 2020). For instance, justice perceptions can mitigate counterproductive work behaviors, lower turnover intentions, and foster trust and commitment (Khattak, Zolin, & Muhammad, 2021). Yet, existing research tends to treat justice as a generalized predictor of positive outcomes, without sufficiently unpacking how its distinct dimensions, namely distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, differentially affect trust within specific organizational contexts (Colquitt et al., 2013; Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2022).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) has emerged as a prominent outcome linked to justice perceptions, with numerous scales developed to assess this relationship (Aeknarajindawat & Jermsttiparsert, 2020; Novitasari, Asbari, Wijaya, & Yuwono, 2020). However, these studies largely adopt a functionalist lens, emphasizing OCB's benefits for organizational performance, while neglecting how justice perceptions shape employees' trust dynamics, especially in crisis scenarios where organizational legitimacy is under scrutiny (Sahoo & Sahoo, 2019; Mubashar et al., 2022).

The relationship between justice and task performance has also been well-documented, as meta-analyses confirm that perceptions of justice, particularly procedural justice, enhance individual effort and the quality of work (Çalışkan & Köroğlu, 2022; Colquitt

et al., 2013). Yet, most of these studies are confined to transactional environments, such as manufacturing or sales, where performance metrics are tangible (Tran, Lepistö, & Järvinen, 2021). In contrast, within HEIs, performance evaluation is often qualitative and complex, making the role of justice perceptions in fostering trust and cooperation more nuanced and context-dependent (Khan, Idris, & Amin, 2021; Silvério & Franco, 2024).

Trust in supervisors has been identified as a critical mediator between justice perceptions and work outcomes (Basit, 2021; Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). However, much of this research assumes stable organizational contexts and hierarchical structures, which may not fully capture the participatory and collegial culture prevalent in academia (Boussenna, 2021; Stojanović-Aleksić, Nielsen, & Bošković, 2019). Moreover, while the interplay between procedural and interactional justice in shaping trust has been established (Haas & Yorio, 2022), but the literature seldom addresses how these dynamics unfold in knowledge-intensive institutions during periods of public scrutiny, such as a public opinion crisis (Islamy & Mubarak, 2020).

Colquitt's (2001) seminal studies provided empirical validation for the multi-dimensionality of organizational justice, confirming the distinct yet interrelated impacts of distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice across educational and industrial settings. Nevertheless, the application of these dimensions

in crisis communication and trust-building processes within HEIs has received minimal empirical attention (Abdelzadeh & Sedelius, 2024; Lewicka, 2022).

Furthermore, recent studies have highlighted the critical role of transparency as a procedural justice component, positing that transparency enhances trust by enabling stakeholders to assess the fairness of organizational processes (Ruder & Woods, 2020; Wang & Guan, 2023). However, transparency's effectiveness in fostering trust is contingent upon perceived authenticity and justice in interactions, suggesting that procedural and interactional justice are interdependent in cultivating trust (Solinas-Saunders et al., 2024; Visser & Scheepers, 2022).

Informational justice, while often overshadowed by distributive and procedural dimensions, is increasingly recognized for its role in fostering cooperation and trust through fair information dissemination (Pareke, 2024; Xu et al., 2023). In HEIs, where information asymmetry and academic freedom coexist, the way information is shared can significantly influence lecturers' trust and identification with the institution, especially during crises (Al-Kurdi, El-Haddadeh, & Eldabi, 2020; Ashraf, Ratan, Amir, Joarder, & Osman, 2024; Hosen et al., 2022).

Nasr, El Akremi, and Coyle-Shapiro (2019) further argued that employees evaluate justice by observing how leaders distribute information and treat colleagues, forming judgments about the organization's respect and justice. This process of social

comparison is particularly salient in HEIs, where collegial interactions and perceptions of justice among peers profoundly shape trust dynamics (Nelson et al., 2019).

While the theoretical frameworks of organizational justice have evolved to encompass multidimensional models with robust empirical backing (Adams & McGuire, 2022), the literature still lacks a contextualized understanding of how these justice dimensions influence trust during organizational crises in HEIs (Lounsbury, 2023; Al Samman & Mohamed, 2024). The majority of existing studies adopt a descriptive approach, focusing on generic workplace outcomes, without critically examining how justice perceptions are mobilized as trust-building mechanisms when institutional legitimacy is challenged by external public scrutiny (Khan et al., 2023; Rahman & Karim, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this critical gap by examining how organizational justice, particularly procedural, interactional, and informational justice, serves as a determinant of organizational trust among lecturers in China's HEIs during a public opinion crisis. By integrating these justice dimensions with the concepts of information transparency and perceived authenticity, this research seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of trust formation in a high-stakes, knowledge-intensive organizational context.

### **2.6.2 Organizational Justice in China's Higher Education Institutions**

The concept of organizational justice within China's HEIs has garnered increasing scholarly attention, emphasizing its influence on institutional culture, faculty behavior, and student outcomes (Dong, 2022; Guo & Liu, 2022). Due to China's socio-cultural context, justice perceptions are often subjective and relational, with fairness judgments influenced by situational factors and interpersonal dynamics (Mo et al., 2024; Zhu, 2024).

Notably, lecturers tend to place significant emphasis on procedural justice during key organizational processes like promotions, research evaluations, and workload allocations (Zhong, 2020). Studies also indicate that fostering an environment where faculty members feel respected and fairly treated by their superiors (interpersonal justice) is critical for organizational commitment and work engagement (Zhao, Cho, Ahn, & Lee, 2020).

Research consistently demonstrates that faculty perceptions of organizational justice significantly influence their engagement in extra-role behaviors, commonly referred to as organizational citizenship behaviors (Qi, Cao, Miao, & Yu, 2020). For instance, Das and Mohanty (2023) found that justice perceptions among lecturers are strong predictors of their willingness to undertake additional responsibilities that benefit the institution, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness.

Lin et al. (2024) highlighted that organizational justice indirectly promotes faculty innovation by fostering work engagement and psychological empowerment, reinforcing the role of justice perceptions in nurturing an innovative academic climate.

Liu and Sheiladevi (2025) investigated Traditional China's Medicine vocational colleges and revealed that transformational leadership practices that emphasize justice significantly boost job satisfaction, mediated by organizational justice. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2020) affirmed that distributive, procedural, and interactional justice positively affect university faculty's organizational citizenship behavior, with affective commitment acting as a key mediator.

Though some studies primarily focus on broader organizational culture, they implicitly highlight the role of justice perceptions in fostering innovation and collaboration (Clauss, Kesting, & Franco, 2024; Tripathi & Sangar, 2023). For instance, Lang (2023) developed a model of organizational culture transformation in China's HEIs, particularly emphasizing openness to innovation and international cooperation. The model suggests that justice in resource allocation and participative decision-making is essential for cultivating an innovative academic environment.

Li and Li (2023) similarly underlined that institutional strategies aimed at general education reform in China's research HEIs are deeply intertwined with justice

perceptions, as justice in governance structures is crucial for ensuring faculty buy-in and successful policy implementation.

Recent discussions in China's higher education also expanded organizational justice to encompass Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice initiatives. Díaz and Wankowicz (2024) advocated for restorative justice principles to foster community cohesion and mutual understanding within academic institutions. Although not traditionally part of the Chinese educational governance discourse, these justice-based inclusivity strategies are increasingly relevant in the context of internationalization and social equity reforms (Wu & Chen, 2019).

In sum, organizational justice in China's HEIs is a multifaceted construct that profoundly influences faculty engagement, institutional innovation, student commitment, and inclusive practices (Hu, 2024a; Lin et al., 2024). While Western concepts of justice provide a useful framework, the Chinese context, shaped by cultural nuances such as relationships, requires adaptive strategies to ensure that notions of justice are effectively cultivated in institutional operations.

### **2.6.3 The Mediation Role of Organizational Justice**

While existing studies have established that information transparency positively influences organizational justice (Hofmann & Strobel, 2020; Stoffberg et al., 2022), the relationship is far from linear or universally beneficial. Transparency can enhance

justice perceptions by granting stakeholders access to decision-making processes (Sofyani, Pratolo, & Saleh, 2022), yet excessive or poorly managed transparency may induce cognitive overload, leading to confusion or mistrust (Erkkilä, 2020). This underscores the need to examine how transparency is perceived and processed within specific organizational contexts, rather than assuming a blanket positive effect (Albu, & Flyverbom, 2019).

At the same time, a robust body of research confirms that organizational justice is a critical antecedent of organizational trust (Mubashar et al., 2022; Sheeraz et al., 2021). Employees' perceptions of outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal treatment influence their willingness to trust organizational leadership (Al Shibly & Bakir, 2022). This dynamic aligns with the Social Exchange Theory, which posits that fair treatment builds reciprocal trust, fostering positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes (Chi et al., 2021; Snyman et al., 2023). However, much of this literature has focused on private-sector organizations or generalized workplace contexts, offering limited insights into trust dynamics in public sector and knowledge-based institutions like HEIs, especially under conditions of public scrutiny (Abdelbadie, Braakmann, & Salama, 2025; Lewicka, 2022).

Trust formation is not an automatic outcome of transparency or justice practices. Rather, it is a subjective process wherein individuals interpret justice cues through their own cognitive and emotional lenses (Malla & Malla, 2023). Lecturers, for

instance, assess the HEI's integrity based on how transparently decisions are communicated and how equitably resources and responsibilities are distributed (Gonsalves & Lin, 2024). Their trust is fostered not merely by access to information, but also by perceiving that the institution consistently upholds fair and respectful treatment in its interactions (Utomo et al., 2023).

While distributive and procedural justice have traditionally dominated research on trust outcomes, interactional justice, which includes respectful communication, explanations, and interpersonal sensitivity, remains relatively underexplored as a determinant of organizational trust (Olson & Ro, 2020). Yet, interactional justice is crucial in the HEI context, where the academic community places a premium on collegial dialogue, mutual respect, and participatory governance. Failure to address these softer, relational aspects of justice can erode trust, even if outcomes and procedures appear objectively fair (Cornet, Barpanda, Guidi, & Viswanathan, 2024; Rispel, 2021).

Empirical studies in China have validated the link between organizational justice and lecturers' trust in HEIs, reinforcing the idea that justice perceptions are central to trust-building in educational institutions (Chi et al., 2021; He & Chi, 2021; Ali & Song, 2023). However, these studies have largely examined direct effects, without thoroughly investigating how organizational justice may function as a mediating

mechanism through which transparency translates into trust (Akter, Banik, Tang, & Adnan, 2024; Solinas-Saunders et al., 2024).

The mediating role of organizational justice is conceptually compelling yet empirically underexplored, particularly in the context of public opinion crises that challenge institutional legitimacy (Ahmed, Adeel, Ali, & Rehman, 2019; Khan et al., 2023). Dahiya (2023) highlighted that justice perceptions enhance not only trust, but also shape how transparency efforts are received, suggesting a reciprocal relationship wherein justice serves as both an outcome of transparency and a conduit to trust.

From a social exchange perspective, this mediation process unfolds in three stages: first, lecturers cognitively assess the justice of transparent practices, forming initial justice perceptions; second, these perceptions translate into emotional trust judgments towards the institution; third, trust manifests in behavioral responses such as cooperation, advocacy, or withdrawal (He & Chi, 2021). Thus, the quality of organizational justice practices determines whether transparency efforts succeed or fail in fostering trust, particularly during crises when institutional credibility is vulnerable (Zheng, 2023a).

Despite the conceptual alignment, empirical studies explicitly testing this mediating role are scarce, especially within China's HEIs facing heightened public scrutiny (Liu et al., 2023). The current literature tends to examine transparency, justice, and trust in

isolation or as direct linear relationships, overlooking the interactive and processual nature of these constructs (Hansen & Weiskopf, 2019; Yang, Penders, & Horstman, 2024). This oversight limits the explanatory power of existing models in capturing the complexities of trust formation in crisis contexts.

Addressing this gap, the present study proposes that organizational justice mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust among lecturers in China's HEIs during a public opinion crisis. By focusing on this mediation mechanism, the study aims to unpack how and why transparency influences trust, contingent on lecturers' justice perceptions, thus contributing a nuanced understanding to the organizational behavior literature.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational justice during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H6: There is a significant relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H7: Organizational justice mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

## **2.7 Underpinning Theory**

The current study applies two underpinning theories, namely the Signaling Theory (ST) and Social Exchange Theory (SET). These two theories will be thoroughly explicated in the next sub-sequent sections.

### **2.7.1 Signaling Theory**

Spence (1973) introduced the Signaling Theory within the labor market. This theory addresses the issue of information asymmetry faced by potential employers when differentiating between highly qualified and low-quality job seekers. The Signaling Theory is instrumental in improving communication within and outside organizations (Guest, Sanders, Rodrigues, & Oliveira, 2021; Moore & Khan, 2020), and revolves around the roles of the signaler, signal, and receiver (Guest et al., 2021). Information asymmetry is the underlying condition for the emergence and progression of the Signaling Theory, where certain members possess information inaccessible to others or where different people or organizations hold varying information (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023). By transmitting information from a signaler to a receiver, the Signaling Theory focuses on mitigating information disparity between two parties (Dang & Nguyen, 2021).

Despite the abundance of publicly available information, there remains a challenge in bridging the gap between existing knowledge and the interpretation of new signals. The Signaling Theory suggests that both negative and positive messages from a signal sender are valuable to the receiver (Yasar, Martin, & Kiessling, 2020). For the receiver

to engage, the signal must maintain significant quality. An essential aspect of quality is closely linked to the reputation and/or prestige of the signal sender (Von Deimling, Eßig, & Glas, 2022). Given the multitude of signals and market noise, along with the pursuit of genuine knowledge, the credibility of the sender and the signal itself must be substantial for the receiver to take action (Ahmed, 2023).

This study is built upon the Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) to clarify the proposed relationships within a conceptual framework. This theory is relevant as it clarifies the information asymmetry between the signaler and receiver of the signal (Sansome et al., 2024), addressing communication challenges both internally and externally within the organization (Guest et al., 2021). The theory consists of four key components: signaler, signal, receiver, and feedback (Yang et al., 2022). It offers a framework for comprehending how the signal sender imparts specific information to the receiver, and the receiver, in turn, provides feedback based on their perception, consequently influencing their behavioral intentions (Song & Kim, 2022). According to the Signaling Theory, the signal sender can diminish information asymmetry by communicating its own information to the receiver (Li, Tang, Jiang, Yen, & Liu, 2019).

The principles of the Signaling Theory encompass several key concepts. Firstly, the signal must be an observable feature or a modifiable activity. In contrast to non-modifiable indicators (e.g., gender), signals can be modified by the participant sending the signal (e.g., education) (Spence, 1973). Secondly, the signal must incur costs that

are negatively related to the quality of the participants. Poor-quality participants invest more to acquire signals and are less likely to mimic signals sent by high-quality participants, which engenders confidence in the message conveyed by the signal (Spence, 2002). Thirdly, in the long run, signalers outperform non-signalers, and receivers acquire experience and new information that enable them to comprehend whether the signal is validated (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023).

Receiver capability refers to the degree to which the receiver can perceive and comprehend the signal (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023). Their ability to respond depends on their notice and understanding of the signal, which can vary depending on the receiver's unique knowledge, background, and experience (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023). Initially, the receiver's capacity to gather and process available signals varies, potentially due to their cognitive resources (Edelman, Manolova, Brush, & Chow, 2021). This implies that an investor's level of education and experience can impact the signals they focus on, with less knowledgeable investors potentially lacking the ability to process a broader range of signals (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023; Butticiè et al., 2021).

In general, the signaler possesses information that is challenging to obtain from the outside world and represents the characteristics of an individual or organization. This information holds value for external decision-makers (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023). Observability and signal cost are two fundamental characteristics of effective signals (Connelly, Certo, Reutzler, DesJardine, & Zhou, 2025). Observability refers to the

extent to which the signal can be noticed by the outside world, while signal cost pertains to the expense individuals or organizations need to bear to obtain high-quality certified signals, which is crucial in avoiding false signals (Islam, Tajalli, Mohebifard, & Hajbabaie, 2021; Jin, Zhang, Chakwizira, & Wang, 2024). The dynamic development of individuals or organizations and changes in the environment necessitate that signal transmitters consistently emit signals to ensure their effectiveness and reduce information asymmetry (Guo, Yang, & Dang, 2024).

The signal receiver, an external stakeholder lacking relevant organizational information, seeks to obtain such information (Connelly et al., 2025). A certain interplay exists between the signal receiver and the sender. The effectiveness of the signal is influenced by the receiver's characteristics, their attention to the signal environment, and the varied interpretations of the signal by different receivers (Blythe, & Fisch, 2025). Feedback occurs when the signal receiver sends an interpretation of the signal to the sender in the form of a 'counter-signal' to enhance the signal's effectiveness. When feedback occurs, the signal sender can be seen as a 'reverse receiver' (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023; Xin et al., 2022).

Busser and Shulga (2019) employed the Signaling Theory to explore different signal-related constructs, such as signal clarity (transparency), signal consistency (authenticity), and signal validity (e.g., engagement, trust, and loyalty). Their study concentrated on the implications of information transparency and authenticity in

shaping organizational outcome (Yang et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the application of the Signaling Theory for examining the authenticity of HEIs information in crisis situations remains limited (Kethüda, 2024). This study adopts the Signaling Theory, wherein HEIs, as the information disseminators, reveal related information to lecturers (information receivers) (Bafera & Kleinert, 2023; Connelly et al., 2025). The transmission of signals incorporates information transparency. With these transparent signals, it is possible to understand what lecturers think and feedback about their trust in HEIs (Cambier & Poncin, 2020; Park & Yoon, 2024).

### **2.7.2 Social Exchange Theory**

The Social Exchange Theory has had a significant impact on various social science disciplines since its emergence in the 1920s (Merkel, 2022; Wang, Wu, Xia, & Lu, 2020). It has influenced fields such as social psychology and sociology (Tripp, 2023; Wang et al., 2020). The Social Exchange Theory is not a singular theory, but rather a broad conceptual framework that spans multiple disciplines, including management, social psychology, and anthropology (Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan, & Ashraf, 2023; Cook & Rice, 2020). It offers a perspective on how social interactions and relationships are built upon reciprocal exchanges, where individuals or groups provide resources with the expectation of receiving something of value in return (Ahmad et al., 2023; Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). Besides, it encompasses a range of conceptual models and addresses areas such as commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, oversight, organizational support, and justice (Waskito,

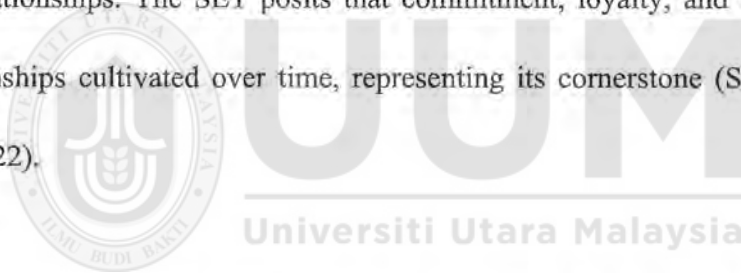
Kussudyarsana, Imronudin, & Linansya, 2023). These elements explore how individuals and organizations engage in reciprocal relationships, highlighting the importance of justice, trust, and mutual benefit in shaping behavior and interactions within organizational contexts (Moin, Behl, Zhang, & Shankar, 2024).

The Social Exchange Theory has been extensively employed to elucidate utilitarian and sociological perspectives on relationships within social networks (Davlembayeva & Alamano, 2023). The theory's broad conceptualization of relationships within communities allows it to explicate nearly all reasonable findings about patterns of behavior (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall, 2017). Emphasis on the principle of reciprocity prevalent in social relations has solidified the theory as a cornerstone of social behaviorism. It has been instrumental in explaining social power, networks, justice, and psychological contracts, and has provided a unified framework for other social phenomena (Davlembayeva & Alamano, 2023).

The Social Exchange Theory is a concept that revolves around a sequence of interactions between two or more parties (Cropanzano et al., 2017). It entails the exchange of resources based on reciprocity, where one party is motivated to return the actions of the other. The nature of these interactions is shaped by the relationship between the actor and the recipient (Blau, 2017). Economic exchanges follow the principle of *quid pro quo*, characterized by lower trust and more active supervision, whereas social exchanges are more open-ended, relying on higher levels of trust and

flexibility (Alhaboose, 2020). Based on these principles, this theory is one of the most enduring and widespread theories.

Dirks and de Jong (2022) have regarded the Social Exchange Theory as a definitive framework for comprehending workplace behavior. This theory significantly influences people's everyday lives, extending beyond organizational boundaries to encompass interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances (Ahmad et al., 2023). According to Cropanzano et al. (2017), the SET entails an individual's initiation toward a goal, the reciprocal attitude or behavioral response of the goal, and the resulting relationships. The SET posits that commitment, loyalty, and trust evolve from relationships cultivated over time, representing its cornerstone (Srivastava & Mohale, 2022).



Davlembayeva and Alamanos (2023) identified three main areas of focus in the examination of individual behavior in the sharing economy theory. Firstly, the theory was initially used to investigate the cost-benefit evaluations that individuals engage in when making decisions in social activities (Kanwal, Rasheed, Pitafi, Pitafi, & Ren, 2020). Concern for costs and benefits is influenced by the environment in which the relationship occurs, and the belief in reciprocal relationships is associated with satisfaction and can drive sustained behavior (Kanwal et al., 2020). This factor is the strongest social predictor of users' willingness to engage in the sharing economy and

is a precursor to helping behavior in organizations (Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2020).

Secondly, the study is centered on investigating the consequences of both reciprocal and non-reciprocal exchanges. According to Tang and Vandenberghe (2020), reciprocal relationships result in commitment, satisfaction, and positive behavior. Reciprocity is seen as fostering commitment through trust and directly affecting commitment by creating emotional attachment (Voss, Tanner, Mohan, Lee, & Kim, 2019; Wang, Chen, & Li, 2024). In non-reciprocal relationships, scholars argue that perceived negative inequality (the belief that individuals receive less in return compared to cost) and positive inequality (the belief that the return outweighs the cost) can cause stress and elicit emotions such as guilt and anger (Mazzuca, Moscatelli, Menegatti, & Rubini, 2022). Relationships that yield outcomes inconsistent with inputs may trigger behaviors aimed at compensating for or retaliating against the lack of reciprocity (Wang, Song, & Zhong, 2022a).

Thirdly, the research stream utilizes the SET framework to explore the impact of social capital factors on the development of both binary and collective relationships (Davlembayeva et al., 2020). Trust, social norms, altruism, and self-interested motivation are key factors that affect the evaluation of relationship outcomes (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). Furthermore, the development of social capital through interaction with members of superior groups positively contributes to the

quality of exchange relations (Ceci, Masciarelli, & Poledrini, 2020). In the context of the sharing economy, individual participation in sharing platforms is constrained by egoistic beliefs, reciprocal norms, and the positive influence of social values (Davlembayeva et al., 2020).

Colquitt and Rodell (2011) argued that intangible resources in social exchange include attributes such as status, information, acceptance, obedience, advice, assistance, and support. Similarly, qualities such as social equity, consistency, bias inhibition, voice, respect, and justification also act as intangible resources in the relationship between justice and vulnerability, which is a form of trust (Mittal et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Schilke et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of justice as a key factor in fostering trust within society. This suggests that staffs build trust in the corporation depending on their perceived justice (Mittal et al., 2019). In line with the reciprocal nature of the Social Exchange Theory, members' trust depends on the organization's capability to take reliable and effective actions, ensure consistent communication, address members' needs, and show genuine concern for their well-being (Assis et al., 2023; Higuchi, Coq-Huelva, Arias-Gutierrez, & Alfalla-Luque, 2020).

The SET suggests that human behavior can be seen as the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis when individuals interact with society and their environment (Wu, Yi, Bu, Lu, & Huang, 2024). If a person believes that the benefits of an action outweigh the costs,

they are more inclined to participate in that action. Conversely, if they believe the costs exceed the benefits, they are less inclined to take action. When someone does not place much value on maintaining relationships, lacks trust, or does not expect to receive rewards from others, the perceived value of social interactions decreases (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Furthermore, Weinstein, Raczynski, and Peña (2020) proposed that shared goals can influence the behavior of both partners in a trusting relationship, thereby strengthening the relationship by acting as a form of currency for exchanges (Karacabey, Bellibaş, & Adams, 2022). Trust, as the currency of social interaction, facilitates faster and easier collaboration for all involved and improves performance (Shayo et al., 2021).

## **2.8 Research Framework**

This section outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research. The theoretical framework is constructed through an extensive review of the literature, while a conceptual framework is proposed to examine the relationships among the variables and investigate the presented hypotheses.

### **2.8.1 Theoretical Framework**

In this research, the Signaling Theory acts as the foundational framework, underpinning the relationship among the independent variable (i.e., information transparency), a mediating variable (i.e., perceived authenticity), and the dependent variable (i.e., organizational trust). This theory, originally proposed by Spence (1973)

in the context of the labor market, suggests that in situations characterized by information asymmetry, signals are used to bridge the gap. The specific rationale for employing this theory in the study lies in the information asymmetry between HEIs and lecturers, where the HEI acts as the signal sender and the lecturer as the signal receiver. Transparent information serves as the signal, and the response of the lecturers to this signal influences the organization's trust in the HEIs (Schmidhuber, Willems, & Krabina, 2022; Sikora-Fernande & Stawasz, 2024).

The Signaling Theory explains how the receiver evaluates the credibility of a signal source. Signal clarity and consistency positively influence the receiver's interpretation of the signal, resulting in positive feedback from the receiver to the transmitter (Von Deimlin et al., 2022). Research by Busser and Shulga (2019) and Yang and Battocchio (2021) demonstrated that consumers' perceptions of organizational transparency and brand authenticity serve as ratings for signal clarity and consistency.

The consumers' perceived authenticity can be seen as a measure of signal consistency and may impact cognitive and behavioral outcomes positively or negatively. In fact, consumers' favorable perceived authenticity affects their assessment of brand credibility and brand attachment (Hernández-Fernández & Lewis, 2019; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). In particular, when a brand is open about its production processes and corporate activities, this transparency involves consumers

in the brand's decision-making and makes them feel as though they are witnesses to the company's claims and actions (Busser & Shulga, 2019; Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Furthermore, Cambier and Poncin (2020) claimed that brand transparency provides consumers with credible and persuasive signals to assess the integrity of a brand. Since a brand's integrity is a key factor in its perceived authenticity, when a brand openly shares its production processes and product costs, consumers tend to view the brand as more authentic (Yang & Battocchio, 2021).

Therefore, this study adopts the Signaling Theory to examine the relationships among information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational trust. In this context, HEIs act as signal senders, openly communicating with lecturers and students to elicit feedback through transparent information. The responses of lecturers and students to these signals impact organizational trust in HEIs.

In addition, the Social Exchange Theory is utilized to clarify the relationship among the independent variable (information transparency), the dependent variable (organizational trust), and the mediating variable (organizational justice). This theory, formulated by Homans (1961) and Blau (1964), suggests that individuals participate in social interactions with others expecting a balance between the rewards and costs involved. It significantly influences organizational trust and helps generate the

influence of information transparency and organizational justice on organizational trust (Honcoop, 2023; Malla & Malla, 2023; Mathew, Jose, & Chacko, 2020).

The Social Exchange Theory is generally regarded as a foundational framework for understanding workplace behavior, with trust being a key element within it (Ahmad et al., 2023; Malla & Malla, 2023; Mathiyazhagan, Sreedharan, & Mathivathanan, 2022).

Pfrombeck, Doden, Grote, and Feierabend (2020) presented that employees can form social exchange relationships with various organizational actors such as colleagues, supervisors, and the organization itself. The significance and relevance of these relationships depend on the specific context in which they occur. At the heart of a social exchange relationship lies an individual's trust in the other party to fulfill their obligation to reciprocate in the future (Srivastava & Mohaley, 2022). Cook and Hahn (2021) agreed that effective social exchange originates from the maturation of relationships over time, culminating in a social exchange characterized by trust and mutual benefit. Therefore, the application of the Social Exchange Theory is deemed appropriate for explicating organizational trust in this study.

The relationship between HEIs and lecturers is facilitated through social exchange (Gbobaniyi et al., 2023). In this process, the information provided by HEI resources enables lecturers to form their own subjective perception of the organization, leading to subjective cognitive evaluations and subsequent behavioral expression (Mayowa-Adebara & Enakrire, 2024). A positive exchange relationship between the HEIs and

the lecturers promotes further interactions and establishes a mutually beneficial value cooperation. Conversely, a negative exchange relationship is more likely to be terminated (Mubashar et al., 2022). The lecturer's subjective state of mind plays a vital role in determining whether this exchange will continue (He & Chi, 2021). Increased information transparency in organizational communications enhances credibility from the employees' perspective (Rawlins, 2008). Specifically, open, honest, and ethical communication can bridge the information gap between employees, emphasizing the need to restore trust through enhanced information transparency (Cole et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have revealed that employees' trust in others is influenced by their perception of justice (Malla & Malla, 2022; Mubashar et al., 2022). This perception can be seen as an indicator of the mutual give-and-take relationship between employees and the organization (Godbless & Goddey, 2020; Koçak & Kerse, 2022). According to Mittal et al. (2019), employees who perceive organizational justice positively are more likely to have higher levels of trust in the organization. Organizational justice mainly pertains to the social exchanges between employees and the organization during decision-making processes such as resource allocation or resolution of disputes. Employees primarily form their perceptions of organizational justice through these exchanges (Mittal et al., 2019).

In the framework of social exchange between employees and the organization, organizational justice can affect employees' loyalty and dedication to the organization

(Pathardikar, Mishra, & Sahu, 2023). With the increase in social communication between employees and the organization, trust in the organization is either enhanced or diminished based on the justice of welfare provisions (Jaskeviciute, Stankeviciene, Diskiene, & Savicke, 2021). Trust is based on social exchange and evolves gradually through consistent observations and interactions (Schilke et al., 2021). When employees perceive the organization's outcomes, processes, and interactions as fair, they feel more secure and build trust in their leaders and the organization overall (Pathardikar et al., 2023).

Prior study rooted in the SET has demonstrated that two parties can mutually satisfy each other through reciprocal exchange (Wang, Song, & Huo, 2019). Within an organization, fair processes serve as a strong indicator of organizational support, and in turn, employees reciprocate this support through emotional commitment (Nazir, Qun, Hui, & Shafi, 2018). Emotional commitment refers to the degree of an employee's identification, involvement, and emotional connection to the organization (Pathardikar et al., 2023). Employees trust the organization with the expectation that it will fairly evaluate their contributions within the employee-organization social exchange and provide a reasonable reward by meeting the employees' unspecified needs (Malla & Malla, 2023).

Overall, the SET highlights the importance of exchange in relationships, focusing on interdependence, compensation, and reciprocity (Schilke et al., 2021). This study

employs this framework to establish the correlation between information transparency, organizational justice, and organizational trust. When institutions treat their members fairly, respectfully, and with care, it is likely to result in positive perceptions, emotions, and reciprocal behaviors based on the principle of reciprocity. Viewed through the lens of social exchange, fair treatment of lecturers in resource allocation leads to a sense of reward for their efforts and promotes positive behaviors that benefit the institution (Chi et al., 2021). Given the above explanation, the theoretical framework of this study is shown in Figure 2.1.

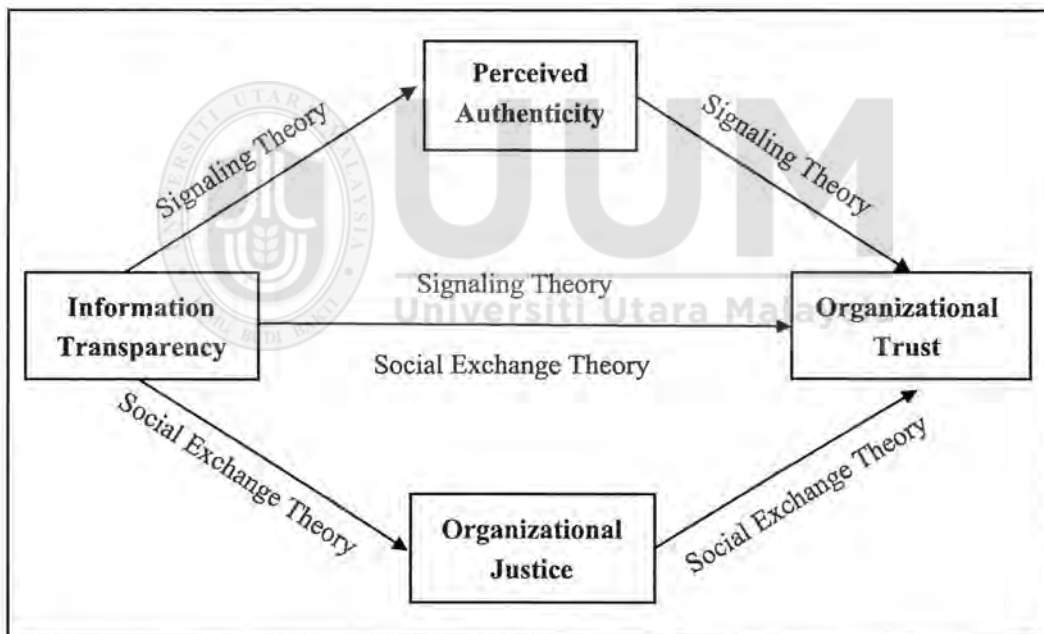


Figure 2.1. Theoretical Framework of Study

### 2.8.2 Conceptual Framework

In research, the dependent variable (DV) is expected to respond to or be affected by changes in the independent variables (IVs) (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, in this context,

‘organizational trust’ is the dependent variable, and ‘information transparency’ (comprising disclosure, clarity, and accuracy) is the independent variable.

A mediating or indirect effect occurs when the impact of the independent variable (X) on the dependent variable (Y) is transmitted through a mediator (M). In other words, X impacts Y because X influences M, and M subsequently impacts Y (Meule, 2019). Hence, in this study, ‘perceived authenticity’ and ‘organizational justice’ serve as mediating variables in the relationship between the independent variable (i.e., ‘information transparency’) and the dependent variable (i.e., ‘organizational trust’).

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 2.2.

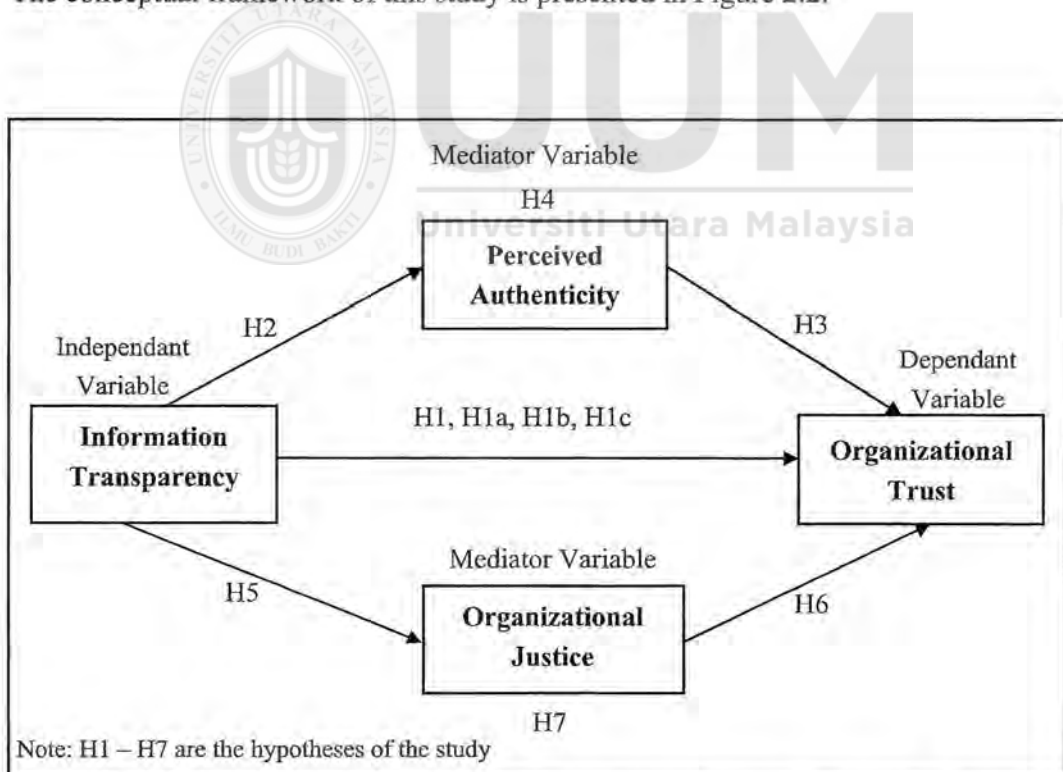


Figure 2.2. Conceptual Framework of Information Transparency, Perceived Authenticity, Organizational Justice, and Organizational Trust

## 2.9 Research Hypotheses

Based on the above literature review and conceptual framework, the hypotheses of this study are summarized as follows:

H1: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1a: There is a significant relationship between information disclosure and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1b: There is a significant relationship between information clarity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1c: There is a significant relationship between information accuracy and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H2: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and perceived authenticity during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H3: There is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H5: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational justice during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H6: There is a significant relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H7: Organizational justice mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

## **2.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter is organized into seven key sections. The first section offered a definition of organizational trust and further examined the status of organizational trust during public opinion crises in HEIs in China. The second section explained the concept of information transparency and discussed research on information transparency in China's HEIs. It also explored the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in HEIs in China. The third part introduced the definition of perceived authenticity and explored the related research. It also detailed the mediating role of perceived authenticity. In the fourth section, a comprehensive description of organizational justice was provided. The relevant research on organizational justice was reviewed, and the mediating role of organizational justice was illustrated. The fifth section introduced the underlying theories used in this study namely the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory. The sixth section established the theoretical framework and conceptual framework. The hypotheses in the seventh section are presented based on the literature review. The methodology applied in this research will be described in the next chapter, elucidating the sampling, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis processes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter starts by outlining the research paradigm, followed by an introduction to the research design, detailing the study population and sample and describing the research instruments. It then explains the pilot test conducted. Finally, data collection procedures and the data analysis process are outlined.

#### 3.2 Research Paradigm

Research paradigm contains the fundamental beliefs, methods, and worldview that guide investigations including the patterns, frames of reference, and models recognized and observed by scholars (Babbie, 2020; Khatri, 2020). The positivist paradigm, also referred to as the scientific paradigm, represents a philosophical framework initially proposed by the French philosopher Auguste Comte (Maretha, 2023). Positivism is widely used in the social sciences and argues that social phenomena can be systematically understood by quantitatively generalizing causal relationships between variables using experiments and correlations (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Mohajan, 2020). Positivist researchers believe that they remain independent of the subject under study, without exerting any influence on it or being influenced by it (Hughes, 2020). Furthermore, the positivist research methods primarily focus on establishing factual causal explanations of social phenomena and

the fundamental laws that govern human social behavior (Clark, Foster, Bryman, & Sloan, 2021).

This study adopts the positivist research paradigm, which aligns with its objective to test hypothesized relationships between variables using empirical data. The paradigm is explicitly grounded in three philosophical assumptions. Ontologically, it assumes that reality is objective, measurable, and exists independently of the researcher. In this study, organizational phenomena such as information transparency and trust are regarded as observable and quantifiable across HEIs (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2022; Clark et al., 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Epistemologically, knowledge is understood to be derived from observable, quantifiable evidence, with emphasis on objectivity and replicability. The researcher remains independent from the subjects studied, ensuring that the findings reflect empirical patterns rather than personal biases (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Hughes, 2020). Axiologically, the research is conducted with value neutrality, meaning that the researcher's personal beliefs or opinions do not influence data collection, analysis, or interpretation. This approach aligns with the positivist emphasis on objective measurement and statistical validation (Brawley Newlin & Bhattacharjee, 2024). These philosophical assumptions are reflected in the study's methodological choices, including the use of structured questionnaires, statistical modeling, and hypothesis testing (Brawley Newlin & Bhattacharjee, 2024).

The constructs in this study are operationalized through structured questionnaires with closed-ended items, reflecting positivism's preference for objective and quantifiable data (Brawley Newlin & Bhattacharjee, 2024). Standardized instruments and statistical tools such as PLS-SEM are employed to test hypotheses and assess model fit, further supporting the paradigm's appropriateness.

The use of deductive reasoning is central to this approach. The study begins with theory-driven hypotheses, which are tested using empirical data (Hair et al., 2021). The structured methodology ensures replicability and reliability, enabling other researchers to validate the findings. This is particularly important given the study's large sample of lecturers from public HEIs in Jiangxi Province.

In summary, the positivist paradigm is consistent with the study's quantitative, theory-testing design. By emphasizing objectivity, empirical validation, and generalizability, it provides a robust framework for examining how variables such as information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice influence trust in HEIs during public opinion crises.

### **3.3 Research Design**

Research design serves as a roadmap to navigate from the starting point to the desired outcome (Jacobs & Cornelius, 2022). It contains a preliminary set of questions to be addressed and the corresponding answers and understanding the relevance of the study

design is essential for achieving research objectives (Adams & McGuire, 2022; Peel, 2020). A research design outlines the specifics of how a study will be carried out (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). In general, the study design provides a framework for researchers to collect data, analyze and interpret the process, and extract the significance of the variables under investigation (Mohajan, 2020). As a result, this study proposes four research questions and utilizes quantitative research with cross-sectional design to address these questions.

The cross-sectional design is widely used in research, and numerous studies on creativity have employed this approach (Lagufa, Moriano, & Gorgievski, 2019). This method is valued for its time and cost efficiency, ease of implementation, and lower susceptibility to control-related issues such as participant withdrawal, loss of interest, or relocation (Chirico, 2023). In cross-sectional studies, data are collected once within a relatively short period. This design is particularly suitable for addressing immediate research questions and for capturing potential relationships between variables at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Accordingly, this study adopts a cross-sectional survey design, with quantitative data collected through a structured questionnaire (Spector, 2019).

The research process for this study is systematically structured, as illustrated in Figure 3.1. It begins with the identification of the research problem, established through an extensive literature review. This review revealed a significant gap in existing studies

regarding the impact of information transparency on organizational trust within HEIs, particularly during public opinion crises. It also highlighted the lack of research incorporating perceived authenticity and organizational justice as mediating variables in this context.

Following the identification of these gaps, relevant variables were defined and structured into a conceptual framework. Information transparency was conceptualized with three distinct dimensions: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, while perceived authenticity and organizational justice were treated as mediating variables that influence the relationship between transparency and organizational trust. The development of this conceptual model was guided by the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory, which provided theoretical justification for the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

Once the conceptual framework was established, a pilot study was conducted with lecturers from public HEIs in Jiangxi Province to validate the measurement instruments. This step ensured the reliability and validity of the questionnaire items before formal data collection. Formal data collection was subsequently carried out through structured questionnaires, and the collected data were subjected to thorough analysis. SPSS 27 was used for initial data screening, including descriptive statistics and reliability tests. Following this, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to assess the measurement model and structural

model, allowing the study to test the hypotheses and evaluate the strength of relationships among the variables. The results from the data analysis were then interpreted and discussed in relation to the research hypotheses and theoretical framework. This process culminated in drawing conclusions that address the research objectives and contribute to a deeper understanding of how information transparency influences organizational trust within HEIs during public opinion crises.

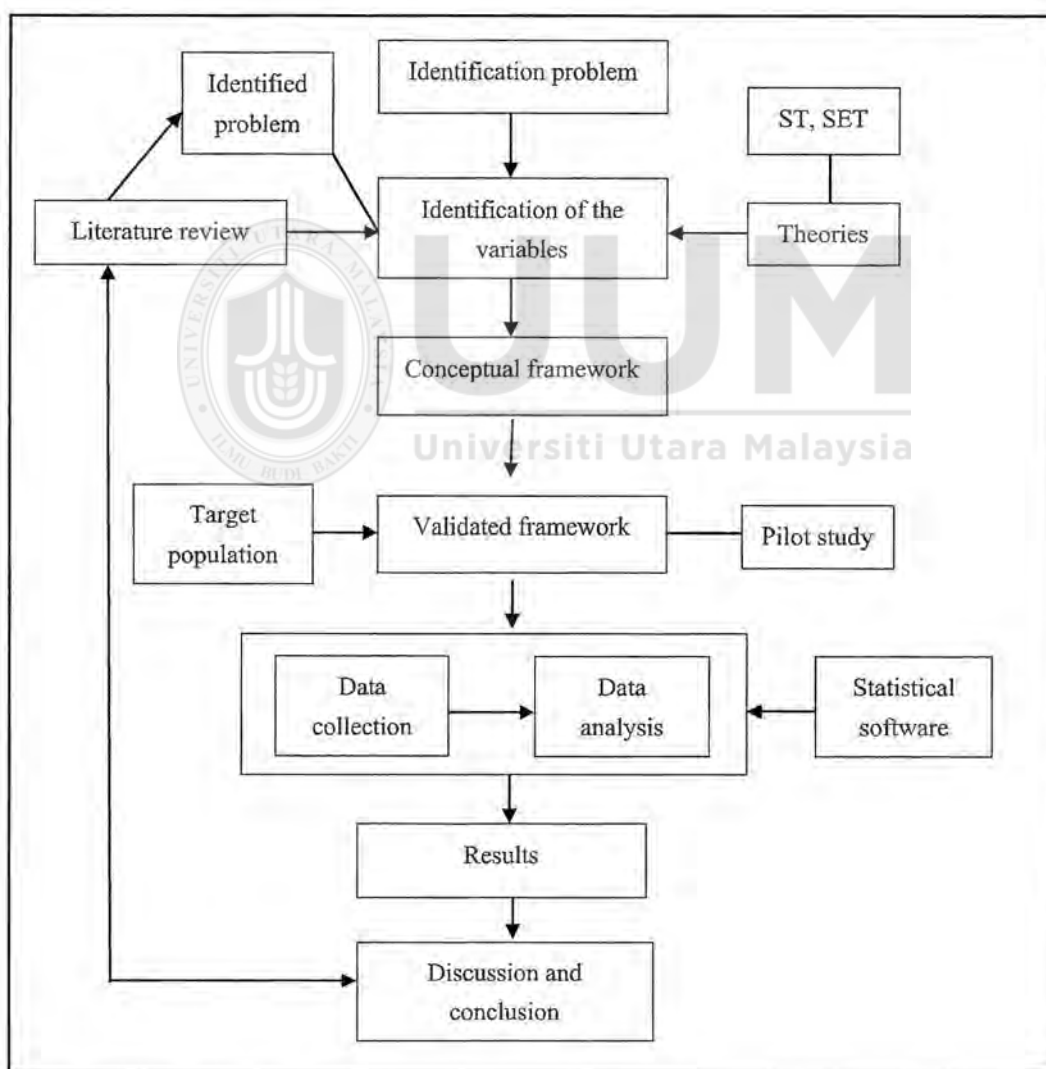


Figure 3.1. Research Process

### 3.4 Population of Study

Population refers to the entire society or an event that a researcher aims to study (Jacobsen, 2020). It represents a cluster of organizations or individuals with similar characteristics (Creswell, 2021). This study targets lecturers employed at public HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China.

Jiangxi Province was purposefully selected as the research site for several reasons. First, public opinion crises have occurred frequently in HEIs within the province, making it a representative context for studying organizational trust under crisis conditions. Notable incidents such as the “mouse head” food safety scandal and an international student injuring someone have raised serious public concerns about crisis management and transparency in Jiangxi’s HEIs (HNR News, 2025; Legal Daily, 2023; People’s Daily Online–Jiangxi Channel, 2023).

Second, Jiangxi possesses a well-structured and diverse public higher education system. As of June 20, 2024, China had 1,308 regular HEIs offering undergraduate or postgraduate education, 878 of which were public (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2024). Among these, Jiangxi is home to 29 regulars public HEIs, collectively employing approximately 32,633 lecturers. Public HEIs in China are funded and overseen by government authorities and are generally larger and more established than private ones (Fang & Liu, 2023; Lu & Liu, 2022). This makes Jiangxi a suitable and generalizable setting for the study.

Third, the researcher's familiarity with local institutional structures and access to administrative support facilitated effective coordination during the data collection process. This contributed to the high response rate, which is critical for ensuring the validity and reliability of cross-sectional survey data.

Lastly, lecturers were selected as the target population because they are key internal stakeholders in HEIs. Their roles make them particularly sensitive to institutional issues related to information transparency, justice, and trust, which are central factors in this research (Dong, 2020; Xu, 2019).

In summary, the population of this study consists of 32,633 full-time lecturers from 29 public HEIs in Jiangxi Province, forming a suitable and relevant group for exploring the research questions.

### **3.5 Sample of Study**

Sampling refers to the method of selecting a subset of individuals from a larger population to participate in a specific study (Lakens, 2022). In addition, sampling involves choosing a group of people, organizations, locations, or phenomena for researchers to explore. The main goal of sampling is to gather information about the population (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Essentially, the research sample is a small part of the overall target of interest to the researchers, which is the population (Cash, Isaksson, Maier, & Summers, 2022).

One of the methods applied to determine the sample size in research is the Slovin formula. The Slovin formula is a useful tool for calculating the sample size or quantity (Anugraheni, Izzah, & Hadi, 2023). Therefore, this study employed Slovin's formula to obtain accurate results for sample size. The formula used is as follows (Slovin, 1960):

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

n = Number of samples

N – Population Size

e – Margin of Error

In determining the sample size, this study had set the following criteria:

N= 32633 (Population size)

e= 0.05 (Margin of Error)



Based on the computation done below, a sample size of 395 was established. Therefore, according to Slovin's formula, the questionnaire was distributed to at least 395 lecturers from five HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China.

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

$$= 32633 / (1 + 32633 * 0.05^2)$$

$$= 395.16$$

### 3.5.1 Sampling Method

The study employed a form of probability sampling, using stratified sampling to obtain a sample representative of the group of lecturers at public HEIs in Jiangxi Province. Probability sampling involves selecting a sample from a population through randomization (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). In this method, each element has a known probability of being selected in the sample, ensuring that every individual has an equal chance of being chosen. A large sample with similar characteristics across the population ensures that the findings can be generalized to the entire population (Sharma, 2023). Therefore, probability sampling is particularly suitable for quantitative research, making it the ideal choice for the current study.

For this study, five public HEIs in Jiangxi Province were randomly selected namely Nanchang University, Jiangxi Normal University, Yichun University, Jingdezhen University, and Xinyu University. To ensure the adequacy of the questionnaire distribution among HEIs lecturers in Jiangxi Province, the number of lecturers in each HEI was calculated by dividing the total number of lecturers in five HEIs to achieve the distribution rate (percentage) of each HEI. The ratio for each institution is then multiplied by the total sample size to determine the number of questionnaires to be distributed at each institution.

Table 3.1 provides detailed information about the sampling procedure performed in this study. Nanchang University distributed 150 questionnaires, accounting for 38.04% of the total number of questionnaires. Jiangxi Normal University distributed 105

questionnaires, accounting for 26.6%, and Yichun University sent 70 questionnaires, accounting for 17.78%. Jingdezhen University distributed 35 questionnaires, accounting for 8.8%, and Xinyu University distributed 35 questionnaires, accounting for 8.78%.

Table 3.1

*Proportion of Sample*

No.	Name of University	Number of Lecturers	Percentage	Questionnaires Distributed
1	Nanchang University	2682	38.04%	150
2	Jiangxi Normal University	1875	26.6%	105
3	Yichun University	1253	17.78%	70
4	Jingdezhen University	620	8.8%	35
5	Xinyu University	619	8.78%	35
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>7049</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>395</b>

### 3.5.2 Response Rate

By the end of July 2024, a total of 430 participants had responded to the questionnaire.

Table 3.2 shows the distribution and response of each HEIs. After reviewing, 55 invalid and unusual responses were excluded, leaving 375 set of valid responses for analysis. This results in a response rate of 87.2%. It is worth noting that a response rate of 70% or higher is required for the results of a study to be generalizable (Hendra & Hill, 2019).

Table 3.2

*Questionnaire Distribution*

No.	Name of University	Answered	Valid
1	Nanchang University	157	138
2	Jiangxi Normal University	108	99
3	Yichun University	77	68
4	Jingdezhen University	42	35
5	Xinyu University	46	35
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>430</b>	<b>375</b>

### 3.6 Research Instruments

This section provides an in-depth discussion on the operationalization instrument of the variables, detailing the scales utilized for each variable. Instrument items for this study were adapted from reliable and validated tools based on existing literature. The researcher adjusted the wording of certain statements by substituting appropriate terminology, omitting irrelevant terms, and modifying tenses. The instruments used in this study included a structured questionnaire containing 53 closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were utilized to facilitate straightforward coding and analysis processes. The questionnaire is organized into five sections. Section A contains 5 questions related to demographic information, including gender, age, position in HEI, years of working experience in HEI, and field of expertise.

Section B consists of 13 questions that measure organizational trust. There are multiple instruments available for assessing organizational trust instrument, with many of them

taking a multidimensional approach to understanding trust, recognizing its complexity (Alsaid, Li, Chiou, & Lee, 2023). The Managerial Interpersonal Trust scale developed by McAllister (1995) examines organizational trust from two dimensions: cognitive-based and affect-based. McAllister's (1995) research explored the nature and function of trust relationships between managers and professionals in organizations, the factors influencing trust development, and the influence of trust on behavior and performance. The research was conducted in a real-world setting with 194 managers and professionals.

Meanwhile, a widely employed measure of attitudinal trust is the Mayer and Davis's (1999) Trust Scale. This scale assesses employees' perceptions of their organization's top management regarding competence, benevolence, and integrity. It includes questions such as "Top management cares a lot about my well-being" and "Most people can count on them to do what they say". These items are frequently used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the other party.

Furthermore, Rawlins (2008) developed an instrument to measure organizational trust. This measurement tool encompasses three dimensions: competence, integrity, and benevolence. Rawlins (2008) employed this instrument to explore trust dynamics between employees and organizations within a sizable regional healthcare non-profit organization. The instrument was reported to have Cronbach's alpha values of .89 and .705, meeting the basic reliability criteria. Given the status of HEI as a non-profit

organization and the status of lecturers as HEI employees, this study employs the Rawlins (2008) Organizational Trust Measurement Tool to assess organizational trust.

Section C consists of 12 questions that assess information transparency in three dimensions namely disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. A widely used instrument for assessing information transparency is the framework developed by Schnackenberg et al. (2021). The instrument comprises 12 items: 4 items related to information disclosure, 4 items related to information clarity, and 4 items related to information accuracy.

Disclosure includes whether the information received by the respondent addresses a particular inquiry. Clarity relates to whether the information provided by the institution is easy to understand. Accuracy has to do with whether the information from the organization looks precise. A post-hoc analysis revealed high AVE values for each construct: disclosure (.87), clarity (.88), and accuracy (.90), confirming their independence. Oldeweme, Märtns, Westmattelmann, and Schewe (2021) tested the reliability and effectiveness of this measurement tool. The reported findings indicated a Cronbach's alpha of over .70, a mean variance extracted of more than .50, and a combined reliability of all the items exceeding the cut-off value of .60.

Based on Schnackenberg et al. (2021), Hossiep et al. (2024) confirmed a shorter version of the scale consisting of ten items. This updated version includes five

dimensions, with the addition of timeliness and relevance in information sharing. The aim was to create a brief assessment of perceived organizational transparency. However, given its complexity, it is recommended to use a concise scale in comprehensive surveys for this purpose (Hossiep et al., 2024). Therefore, this study adopted Schnackenberg et al.'s (2021) three-dimensional transparency scale to assess information transparency in China's HEIs.

Section D consists of 7 questions that measure perceived authenticity. Multiple studies have traditionally viewed authenticity as a one-dimensional concept and have employed multi-item scales to measure it (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Shen & Kim, 2012; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). These scales typically combine a single item such as 'authentic' with similar items such as 'sincere', 'genuine', or 'honest' (Gershon & Smith, 2020). Other one-dimensional measures are based on the Authenticity Scale developed by Kernis and Goldman (2006), Walumbwa et al. (2008), and Wood et al. (2008). This research builds on the above research to assess perceived authenticity as a dimensional concept.

Shen and Kim (2012) introduced a comprehensive scale designed to measure perceived authenticity in organizations, drawing from research on perceived authenticity in public relations. Their scale contained seven measures of perceived authentic organizational behavior, based on the perceptions of 23 undergraduate participants' interactions with campus organizations. Sample questions included:

“This organization consistently tells the truth” and “The organization’s actions are sincere”. The reliability was confirmed by Shen and Kim (2012), with a reported Cronbach’s alpha value of .90. Building on Shen and Kim’s (2012) research on perceived authenticity in public relations, this study applies the perceived authenticity scale to the context of public relations in China’s HEIs.

Section E consists of 16 questions that measure organizational justice. There has been considerable debate regarding the definition of the organizational justice concept, and efforts to develop appropriate tools for measuring organizational justice have been on the rise. Various tools have been created to assess the overall perception of justice or its specific dimensions (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003; Omar, Salessi, Vaamonde, & Urteaga, 2018). A literature review revealed that the organizational justice scale formulated by Colquitt (2001) encompasses the four dimensions proposed by Greenberg (2017) and is regarded as one of the most comprehensive assessments of justice. Colquitt (2001) integrated his scale with 20 five-point Likert-type items, including 7 items for measuring procedural justice from Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Leventhal (1980), 4 items for measuring distributive justice from Leventhal (1980), 4 items for measuring interpersonal justice from Bies and Moag (1986), and 5 items for measuring informational justice from Bies and Moag (1986) and Shapiro, Buttner, and Barry (1994).

Several research have employed the Colquitt (2001) organizational justice scale to examine organizational justice, yielding the following Cronbach's alpha values. For instance, Primawidi and Mangundjaya (2020) confirmed the reliability coefficient of this scale as .905. Magnavita et al. (2022) derived a Cronbach's alpha value of .947. Considering these factors, it is imperative to utilize a suitable instrument for measuring the perception of organizational justice among higher education lecturers in China. Therefore, this study employs the Organizational Justice Scale established by Colquitt (2001) in Section E.

The questionnaire features a Five-point Likert Scale ranging from '1' to '5' (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree) and was distributed online. Given that the primary language in China is Chinese, utilizing Chinese questionnaires will facilitate effective communication and information gathering with Chinese respondents. Hence, the original questionnaire is in English and will be translated into Chinese using a back-translation method to ensure consistency in meaning. The proof of instrument validation and the translation certification letter are provided in Appendix B and Appendix C.

### **3.7 Pilot Test**

Pilot testing entails preparing and experimenting on a small group or sample before the actual study. A pilot test is conducted to evaluate the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument (Teresi, Yu, Stewart, & Hays, 2022). Additionally, pilot testing

allows researchers to assess the actual state of the study, which enables them to anticipate and address potential challenges during the main study (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020).

In the majority of pilot tests, the sample size is usually relatively small, typically ranging from 30 to 120 responses (Bell et al., 2022). In the current research, 113 questionnaires were distributed in April 2024. However, 27 questionnaires were deemed inappropriate and were therefore excluded, resulting in 86 questionnaires for the pilot study. The upcoming section will elaborate on the process of validating and ensuring the reliability of the study. The outcomes of this pilot study were analyzed by means of SPSS 27.

### **3.7.1 Validity of Instrument**

Validity indicates the degree to which the instruments, techniques, or measures used in research accurately capture the concept they are intended to assess (Clark et al., 2021). It involves demonstrating that the tools, techniques, or methods used in the study effectively measure the concept presented (Hair et al. 2021). In this study, the instrument was first evaluated by experts for content validity, followed by an assessment of construct validity through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) after data collection.

### 3.7.1.1 Content Validity

For content validity, Bougie and Sekaran (2019) emphasized the significance of it in data analysis. Content validity indicates how effectively a concept's structure is represented (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). To ensure content validity, the researcher sought feedback from two professors from relevant majors at China's HEIs to evaluate whether all items in the adapted questionnaire effectively measured the content of the current study. The researcher sent documents and questionnaire related to the research objectives to the reviewers for their evaluation of the contents. After adjusting the original scale, considering the study's location in China, the researchers also sought the help of two English-speaking professional lecturers to assess the applicability of translating the questionnaire into Chinese. The proof of instrument validation and the translation certification letter are provided in Appendix B and Appendix C.

Following feedback and recommendations from the reviewers, the researcher made necessary modifications to the questionnaire. The scales for 'Information Transparency' and 'Perceived Authenticity' were deemed satisfactory by the reviewers, and thus no modifications were made to them. Details of the modifications made to the 'Organizational Trust' and 'Organizational Justice' scales are outlined in Tables 3.3 and 3.4, respectively.

Table 3.3

*Items Adapted in Questionnaire of Organizational Trust*

Item No.	Original Item	Revised Item
1.	I'm willing to let my organization make decisions for people like me.	I'm willing to let my organization make decisions for me.
2.	I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me.	I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of me.
3.	I trust the organization to take care of people like me.	I trust the organization to take care of academic staff.
4.	I feel very confident about the skills of this organization.	I feel very confident about my organization.
5.	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.	No change.
6.	This organization is known to be successful at the things it tries to do.	No change.
7.	The organization treats people like me fairly and justly.	The organization treats academic staff fairly and justly.
8.	The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.	No change.
9.	Sound principles seem to guide the behaviour of this organization.	No change.
10.	This organization does not mislead people like me.	This organization does not mislead academic staff.
11.	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about academic staff.
12.	I believe this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	I believe this organization takes the opinions of academic staff into account when making decisions.
13.	This organization is interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself.	This organization is interested in the well-being of academic staff, not just itself.

Firstly, two experts suggested changing the seven-point Likert scale in the Rawlins (2008) questionnaire to a five-point Likert scale to maintain consistency with the other variables instruments. This decision was rooted in research showing that five-point Likert scales improve response quality and rate and reduce participant frustration (Taherdoost, 2019).

As shown in Table 3.3, it is clear that a substantial alteration took place, wherein the phrase ‘people like me’ was substituted with ‘me’ in items 1 and 2. Since these queries are evaluated from the respondents’ personal perspective, using only the word ‘me’ makes it more explicit. Additionally, in items 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, and 13, the phrase ‘people like me’ was changed to ‘academic staff’ based on the context. Finally, in item 4, ‘the skills of this organization’ was revised to ‘my organization’ to prevent any potential misunderstanding, as the term ‘skills’ encompasses various aspects. Table 3.4 presents the detailed explanation of the modifications made in all the items under ‘Organizational Justice’.

Table 3.4

*Items Adapted in Questionnaire of Organizational Justice*

Item No.	Original Item	Revised Item
1.	Have you been able to express your views and feelings during those procedures?	I am able to express my views and feelings during the crisis management procedures
2.	Have you had influence over the (outcome) arrived at by those procedures?	I have had an influence on the outcome of the crisis management procedures.
3.	Have those procedures been applied consistently?	The crisis management procedures were applied consistently.
4.	Have those procedures been free of bias?	The crisis management procedures were free of bias.
5.	Have those procedures been based on accurate information?	These crisis management procedures were based on accurate information.
6.	Have you been able to appeal the (outcome) arrived at by those procedures?	I am able to appeal the outcome of the crisis management procedures.
7.	Have those procedures upheld ethical and moral standards?	The crisis management procedures upheld ethical and moral standards.

Table 3.4 continued

8.	Has (he/she) treated you in a polite manner?	I am being treated with politeness by leaders.
9.	Has (he/she) treated you with dignity?	I am being treated with dignity by leaders.
10.	Has (he/she) treated you with respect?	I am being treated with respect by leaders.
11.	Has (he/she) refrained from improper remarks or comments?	The leaders refrained from making improper remarks or comments.
12.	Has (he/she) been candid in (his/her) communications with you?	I received the truth and honest communication from the leaders
13.	Has (he/she) explained the procedures thoroughly?	The leaders thoroughly explained the procedures for managing a public opinion crisis.
14.	Were (his/her) explanations regarding the procedures reasonable?	The leaders' explanation of the crisis management procedures is reasonable.
15.	Has (he/she) communicated details in a timely manner?	The leaders communicated details in a timely manner.
16.	Has (he/she) seemed to tailor (his/her) communications to individuals' specific needs?	The leaders tailored their communication to meet the specific needs of individuals.

Initially, the experts introduced a significant adjustment to the options of the scale. Although the five-point Likert scale was maintained, they decided to change the names of the options. This adjustment was made to ensure consistency with the other scales and to simplify the respondents' decision-making process. The original scale used a five-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = to a small extent to 5 = to a large extent. This was later modified to a level of agreement, with the options 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree', and 'Strongly Agree'. Additionally, based on the reviewers' recommendations, the question format was changed from a question sentence to a declarative sentence.

In relation to the proposed modifications to the survey questions, a notable adjustment was observed in items 1 to 7 and 14, where the phrase ‘these procedures’ was replaced with ‘the crisis management procedures’. This alteration aims to enhance clarity for the survey participants regarding the specific context in which the questions are being presented. Besides that, in items 8 to 16, the term ‘he/she’ was replaced with ‘leaders’, as these pertain to the authority responsible for developing the procedure.

### **3.7.1.2 Construct Validity**

This study employs Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to validate the construct of the instrument. EFA is a commonly employed statistical method, particularly in social science research (Sürücü, Yıkılmaz, & Maşlakçı, 2022). According to Rogers (2022), this method yields superior results when each common factor is well represented by a large number of measured variables, which function as independent constructor-dependent structures in the analysis. EFA is applied to each item to detect any changes in component dimensionality from previous research, brought about by changes in the population’s characteristics over time (Sürücü et al., 2022). Therefore, EFA was utilized in this study to confirm the construct validity of the instrument, given that not all of the items used have been adapted to the Chinese context. This indicates that the fundamental items of the structure may vary when applied to the Chinese context.

In the present study, factor analysis was performed on the raw scale data using the SPSS 27 statistical software package. The researcher initiated the analysis by

conducting the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, adhering to the recommendations of Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2022) to ensure the appropriateness of the factor analysis.

The KMO test evaluates the suitability of the sample size for analysis by comparing observed correlation coefficients with partial correlation coefficients. An ideal KMO value approaches unity, indicating sufficient sampling, while values between .80 and 1.0 are considered satisfactory. Conversely, a KMO value below .60 suggests inadequate sampling and necessitates corrective measures (Field, 2024). Table 3.5 illustrates the outcomes of the KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

As shown in Table 3.5, the preliminary findings of the pilot test revealed KMO Values pertaining to various constructs. Specifically, the KMO Value for organizational trust, information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice were recorded as .906, .913, .850, and .911, respectively. Additionally, the KMO values for the sub-dimensions of information transparency, including disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, were determined as .845, .840, and .828, respectively. These values all exceed .80, indicating that the sample size is sufficient, and that factor analysis is appropriate for the data. Furthermore, the significance of the Bartlett Test of Sphericity for all variables was less than .000, suggesting a significant relationship between the variables (Field, 2024).

Table 3.5

*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity*

Variable	The measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)	Significant
Organizational Trust	.906	.000
Information Transparency	.913	.000
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Disclosure	.845	.000
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Clarity	.840	.000
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Accuracy	.828	.000
Perceived Authenticity	.850	.000
Organizational Justice	.911	.000

**3.7.2 Reliability of Instrument**

The reliability of a measurement tool refers to the consistency of results when the tool is used multiple times. Cronbach's alpha test is commonly utilized to assess the reliability of multiple-question Likert Scale surveys, which measure hidden or unobservable variables that are difficult to measure in real life (Backhaus, Erichson, Gensler, Weiber, R., & Weiber, 2021). This test provides valuable insight into the relevance of a set of test items. In exploratory research, Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .60 to .70 are regarded as acceptable, while values between .70 and .90 are considered satisfactory in more advanced stages of research (Hair et al., 2022). Therefore, in the present study, the reliability of the measuring instrument was conducted by analyzing the Cronbach's alpha, which is the most widely used method

(Shrestha, 2021). Reliability testing was carried out using SPSS 27, and the findings are detailed in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6 presents the Cronbach's alpha values for all the constructs, indicating reliability coefficients within the range of .887 to .947. The measurement of information transparency encompasses three dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values as follows: .916 for Dimension 1 (disclosure), .897 for Dimension 2 (clarity), and .913 for Dimension 3 (accuracy). The overall Cronbach's coefficient for the information transparency scale is .947. Furthermore, the Cronbach's alpha values for the variables of perceived authenticity and organizational justice, are .887 and .946, respectively. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for organizational trust is .913.

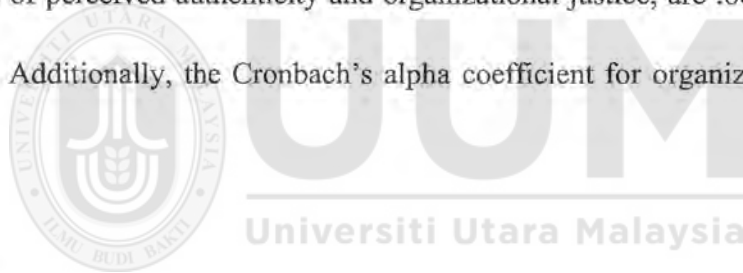


Table 3.6

*Reliability Test*

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Information Transparency	12	.947
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Disclosure	4	.916
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Clarity	4	.897
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Accuracy	4	.913
Perceived Authenticity	7	.887
Organizational Justice	16	.946
Organizational Trust	13	.913

Upon concluding the analysis, it was found that the Cronbach's alpha values for all the constructs exceeded .85, signifying the questionnaire's high internal consistency and strong reliability (Hair et al., 2022). Consequently, the researcher made the decision to utilize the scale in the ensuing study.

### **3.8 Data Collection Procedure**

This research utilized a survey to gather data related to various variables. Surveys are widely utilized in the social sciences and education sector as a research technique (Chowdhury, Oakkas, & Ahmmed, 2022). Employing questionnaires facilitates efficient data collection, covering numerous questions in a brief period and allowing for the generalization of findings using large samples (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Furthermore, Shrestha (2021) claimed that survey is an excellent tool for assessing population attitudes and consistency. Given that this research examines the relationship among variables, it is fitting to utilize a survey instrument to investigate how variables impact or correlate with each other (Creswell, 2021).

Data collection officially began in May 2024. More precisely, the data collection process was conducted over 62 days, from 28 May to 29 July 2024. The researcher utilized an online questionnaire method for data collection. The Internet is considered a powerful tool for conducting public surveys due to its cost-effectiveness and high efficiency (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). Data was collected through online questionnaires, ensuring a broader coverage and deeper understanding of the

phenomenon under investigation (Fife-Schaw, 2020). These questionnaires were distributed using self-administration techniques. The key advantages of employing online questionnaires include the flexibility it offers to respondents, allowing them to complete the survey at their convenience. Additionally, it can help eliminate the psychological stress often associated with face-to-face interviews and assist respondents in avoiding bias.

The online questionnaire was created and hosted on the Wenjuanxin website, and distributed through WeChat online platforms. The survey link clearly outlined the purpose of the survey and provided assurance of participant anonymity. Additionally, all information provided by the respondents were kept confidential and used exclusively for academic purposes.

### **3.9 Data Analysis**

Data analysis includes process and statistical tools that enables researchers to assess the data, test hypotheses, refine theories, and draw significant conclusions about the phenomena under investigation (Meeker, Escobar, & Pascual, 2021). To achieve this, both descriptive and inferential statistics are employed as methods of data analysis. Statistical data were analyzed using SPSS 27, including the respondents' demographics and data screening. At the same time, PLS-SEM was used to evaluate the research hypotheses based on the quantitative aspect of the research question as

well as the effectiveness and reliability of the instrument by evaluating the measurement and structural model.

### **3.9.1 Descriptive Analysis**

Descriptive statistics offer essential insights into the nature and characteristics of the study, guiding the selection of appropriate techniques for data analysis and hypothesis testing (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). It offers information about the frequency of occurrence, mean score, central tendency (mean, median, and mode), as well as measures of dispersion (range, variance, and standard deviation) for the phenomenon under study (Bell et al., 2022). This study utilizes descriptive analysis to gain an understanding of sample characteristics and the unique features of the study.

Once the researcher had collected unrefined data from the research area, all valid questionnaires were entered into the SPSS 27 after being coded. The data were then evaluated using a subsequent data evaluation procedure. First, the raw data was filtered to locate errors in data entry. Each variable was frequency tested to detect and correct possible missing values by using the corresponding average. Next, the box-plot method was employed to eliminate outliers.

In addition, the skewness and kurtosis of the data were tested for normal distribution in this study. A key requirement for multivariate analysis is normality, which indicates that the data distribution is normal (Hair et al., 2021). A perfectly normal distribution

of data occurs when the skewness and kurtosis values are equal to zero (Hatem, Zeidan, Goossens, & Moreira, 2022). However, according to Demir (2022), the critical values for skewness and kurtosis should not exceed  $\pm 1.96$ .

### **3.9.2 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)**

PLS-SEM is a flexible, powerful, and superior statistical tool for testing theories, predicting outcomes, and constructing models (Hair et al., 2022). As a path modeling technique, PLS-SEM ensures the reliable and efficient implementation of confirmatory factor analysis for measurement items and has been commonly utilized by researchers in different social science and business fields (Hair et al., 2021). The PLS-SEM method encompasses multiple approaches, including multiple regression analysis, discriminant analysis, analysis of variance, logistic regression, and cluster analysis. It is recommended for exploratory research because it can simultaneously perform multiple regression analyses (Sarstedt, Ringle, & Hair, 2021).

PLS-SEM is capable of effectively managing both reflective and formative aspects of measurement models, as well as monomial structures, without encountering identification issues. Moreover, researchers have found that PLS-SEM offers high efficiency in parameter estimation, leading to greater statistical power compared to CB-SEM. This greater statistical power indicates that PLS-SEM can effectively highlight specific relationships within the population. Similarly, when compared to

total score-based regression, PLS-SEM demonstrates superior statistical power (Hair et al., 2021).

Besides that, since this study examines two mediating relationships in one model simultaneously (that is, the mediating role of perceived authenticity between information transparency and organizational trust, and the mediating role of organizational justice between information transparency and organizational trust), it is more appropriate to use PLS-SEM technology to test this model.

A SEM with latent constructs consists of two components. The first component is the measurement models, also known as outer models in the context of PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022). The measurement model involves a one-way predictive relationship between each latent variable and its corresponding indicators. Multiple relationships are not permitted, so the indicator variables are linked to only one latent variable. PLS-SEM is capable of handling both formative and reflective measurement models. The reflectance indicator is represented as a one-way arrow pointing outwards from the underlying structure to the indicator variable. In PLS-SEM, the correlation coefficient of these relationships is referred to as the outer loadings. In contrast, it is assumed that the Primal Indicator leads to the latent structure, and that the change in the indicator determines the change in the latent structure value (Hair et al., 2021). Formative indicators are represented by one-way arrows that point to the underlying conditions

in which the indicator variable is inward. The correlation coefficients of these homology relationships are called external weights in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022).

The second component of SEM is the structural model, often known as the internal model in the context of PLS-SEM (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2024). It displays the relationships (paths) between the underlying structures. PLS-SEM only permits recursive associations in the structural model (i.e., no causal loops). As a result, the relationships between potential structures are directional, meaning they only flow in a single direction. The model consists of exogenous constructs (independent variables) and endogenous constructs (dependent variables). The term “exogenous” refers to constructs that do not have any structural paths pointing towards them within the model. Therefore, the term “endogenous” refers to constructs in structural models that are dependent on other constructs, being influenced or explained by them through the relationships specified in the structural model (Hair et al., 2021).

### **3.9.2.1 Assessing the Measurement Model**

In the current research, the measurement model includes not only one-dimensional structures, but also second-order concepts of reflection-forming structures formed by reflections. In the first phase, the investigator tested the reliability and validity of the first-order response model, including the following criteria (Hair et al., 2022):

- i. Internal consistency reliability
- ii. Indicator reliability

- iii. Convergent validity
- iv. Discriminant validity
- v. Cross-loadings

Table 3.7 illustrates the standards for measuring first-order-reactivity indicator measurement model.

Table 3.7

*Assessing First-order-reactivity Indicator Measurement Model*

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Description</b>
Internal consistency reliability	Higher values generally indicate higher levels of reliability. Composite reliability: should be higher than .60. Cronbach's alpha: should be higher than .70.
Indicator reliability	Indicator loadings should be higher than 0.70. It indicates that the construct explains more than 50 per cent of the indicator's variance, thus providing acceptable item reliability.
Convergent validity	Convergence validity is the degree to which convergence is constructed to account for its item variance. The metric used to assess the convergence validity of a construct is the mean extracted variance (AVE) of all items on each construct. The AVE should be higher than 0.50.
Discriminant validity	It refers to the degree to which a measurement/indicator of a particular structure is empirically delayed with a measurement/indicator of another structure. Establishing discriminant validity in the model indicates the uniqueness of the construct, which means that any phenomenon captured by the construct cannot be explained. Fornell-Larcker criterion: the AVE of each latent construct should be higher than the construct's highest squared correlation with any other latent construct. HTMT: defined as the mean value of item correlations between different structures relative to the (geometric) mean

of item average correlations measuring the same structure. When HTMT values are high, there is a problem with discriminant validity. It is recommended to set the threshold to 0.90. In this case, an HTMT value above 0.90 indicates the absence of discriminant validity.

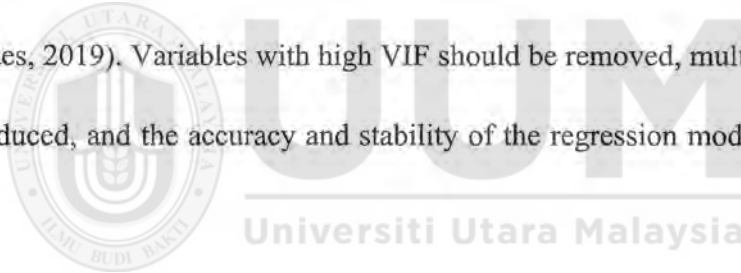
Cross-loadings

Cross-loadings provide another check for discriminant validity. If an indicator has a higher correlation with another latent variable than with its respective latent variable, the appropriateness of the model should be reconsidered.

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Source: Hair et al., 2021

In the second phase, the researcher evaluated the collinearity of formative measures, the level of significance, and the correlation. A variance inflation factor (VIF) higher than 5 indicates that the formative index has potential collinearity problems (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2019). Variables with high VIF should be removed, multicollinearity should be reduced, and the accuracy and stability of the regression model should be improved.



### 3.9.2.2 Assessing the Structural Model

Reliable and valid external model estimation allows for the evaluation of internal path model estimates. The fundamental criteria for this evaluation, as outlined by Hair et al. (2021), are as follows:

- i. Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ )
- ii. Effect size ( $F^2$ )
- iii. Prediction relevance ( $Q^2$ )
- iv. Estimates for path coefficients (using bootstrapping)

Table 3.8 displays the criteria for evaluating structural models.

Table 3.8

*Assessing Structural Models*

Criterion	Description
Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ )	$R^2$ is a measure of a model's explanatory power, also known as intra-sample predictive power. $R^2$ ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values being explanatory. $R^2$ values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 can be considered explanatory strong, moderately explanatory, and weak explanatory.
Effect size ( $F^2$ )	$F^2 = (R^2 \text{ included} - R^2 \text{ excluded}) / (1 - R^2 \text{ included})$ values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 can be viewed as a gauge for whether a predictor latent variable has a weak, medium, or large effect at the structural level.
Prediction relevance ( $Q^2$ )	$Q^2$ combines aspects of out-of-sample prediction and intra-sample interpretive ability. The $Q^2$ value should be greater than zero to indicate the predictive accuracy of the constructed structural model. $Q^2$ values above 0, 0.25, and 0.50 indicate small, medium, and large predictive correlations for the PLS path model.
Path coefficients	The path coefficient represents the direct influence of one variable that is considered a cause on another variable that is considered an effect, and also indicates the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables. The critical t-values for the two-tailed test were 1.96 (significance level = 5%), 2.58 (significance level = 1%), and 3.29 (significance level = 0.1%). If the p-value $\leq .05$ , the researcher concludes that there is a correlation between the variables and the hypothesis holds.

Source: Hair et al., 2021

**3.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with an exploration of the research paradigm, followed by a discussion on the rationale for utilizing quantitative research methods. Subsequently, the research design, study population, sample were presented. A comprehensive explanation of the instruments applied for quantitative data collection was then provided. Additionally, the pilot study and the evaluation of the reliability and validity of the chosen quantitative instrument were expounded upon. Finally, the processes for data collection and the methods for data analysis were outlined.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter firstly presents the data screening procedure, followed by the test of normality, the respondents' demographic profile, the descriptive statistics for the variables, and the hypothesis testing. Measurement models comprising internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0. The results of the structural modeling mainly focused on the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect sizes ( $F^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and path coefficients of the entire research model. Finally, the assumptions are summarized.

#### 4.2 Data Screening

Prior to multivariate analysis, the preparation, editing, and screening of data are considered essential steps. It is important to perform data filtering because it can identify any situation that may violate the basic assumptions of the application of multivariate methods (Hair et al., 2021). In addition, the initial examination of the data enables the researchers to increase a deeper understanding of the collected data.

Initially, a preliminary screening was conducted on the 430 collected responses, leading to the exclusion of 46 responses. These were discarded due to either a response time of less than 100 seconds or clear errors in the answers, such as selecting 'professor'

as the title while reporting less than 5 years of work experience. Hence, 384 responses remained.

Next, the box-plot method was employed to detect and manage outliers. Outliers are extreme points in a given set of data that are scored far apart from other observations (Boukerche, Zheng, & Alfandi, 2020). Checking for outliers is critical in the analysis, as outliers can mislead statistical tests if they are problematic (Hair et al., 2021). The process was repeated and 9 out of the 384 original cases in the field were identified as outliers and subsequently removed. As a result, 375 respondent cases remained for further analysis.

#### **4.3 Test of Normality**

A normality assessment was conducted to examine the data after confirming the absence of missing data and outliers. According to Hair et al. (2022), normality relates to the distribution pattern of a specific variable and its alignment with the standard normal distribution in statistical analysis. Normal distribution is an important assumption for SEM and statistical analysis (Hair et al., 2021). To evaluate normality and potential deviations in the distribution, the study employed the statistical methods of Skewness and Kurtosis (Hair et al., 2021; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The results are presented in Table 4.1.

Hair et al. (2022) suggested that an acceptable skewness value falls within the range of -2 and +2. Kurtosis values between -7 and +7 are considered appropriate (Collier, 2020). Values falling outside these ranges are regarded as questionable. As shown in Table 4.1, the absolute values of skewness and kurtosis for each item in the current research fall within the satisfactory range.

Besides that, standard error of skewness and kurtosis were also used for checking normality. The data are considered normal if the z-scores for skewness and kurtosis are -1.96 to +1.96 (Demir, 2022). The real results were obtained by dividing the values of skewness and kurtosis by their standard error values. After calculation, it was found that the actual values of kurtosis and skewness were within the specified range. Therefore, the data is considered to be normally distributed.

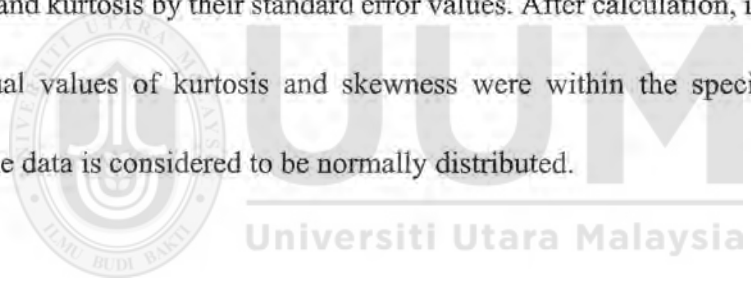


Table 4.1

*Normality Test of Variables*

Variables	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Information Transparency	375	-0.187	0.126	-0.287	0.251
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency:	375	-0.27	0.126	-0.246	0.251
Disclosure					
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency:	375	-0.381	0.126	0.228	0.251
Clarity					

Table 4.1 continued

Sub-dimension of Information Transparency:	375	-0.153	0.126	-0.259	0.251
Accuracy					
Perceived Authenticity	375	-0.145	0.126	-0.145	0.251
Organizational Justice	375	-0.237	0.126	-0.312	0.251
Organizational Trust	375	-0.11	0.126	-0.463	0.251

In addition, histograms and normal probability (Q-Q) plots were applied in this study to visualize the normally distributed data (Khatun, 2021). Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 show histograms for all the variables in this study. The data depicted in the histogram illustrate a normal distribution pattern, as evidenced by the close alignment of the histogram bars with the theoretical normal curve. This observation suggests that the collected organizational trust scores are consistent with the normality characteristic, which supports the appropriateness of subsequent statistical analyses using this distribution model.

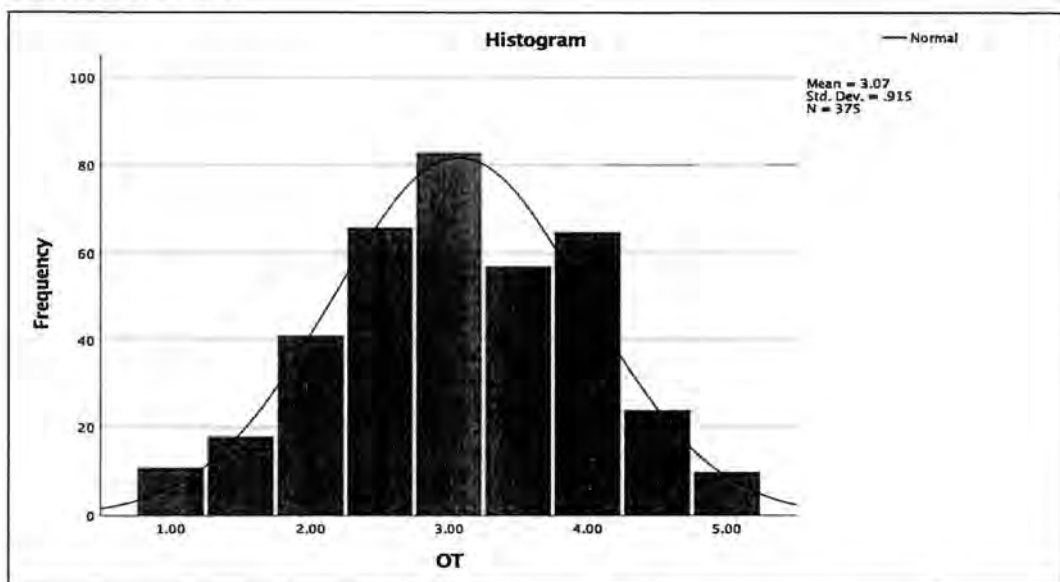


Figure 4.1. Histogram of the Normality Plot of the Organizational Trust (Dependent Variable)

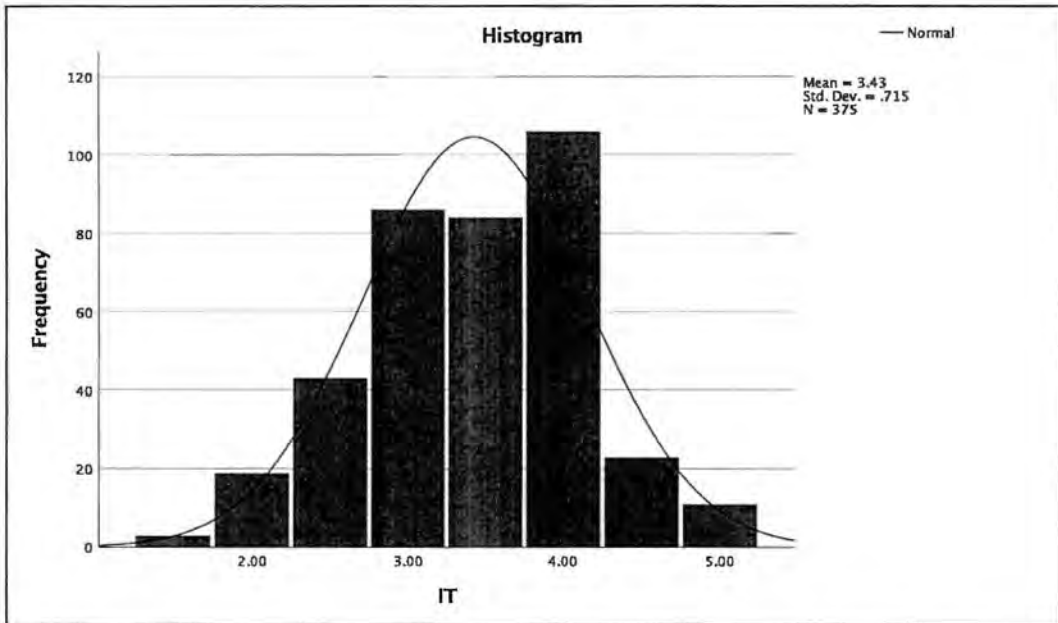


Figure 4.2. Histogram of the Normality Plot of the Information Transparency (Independent Variable)

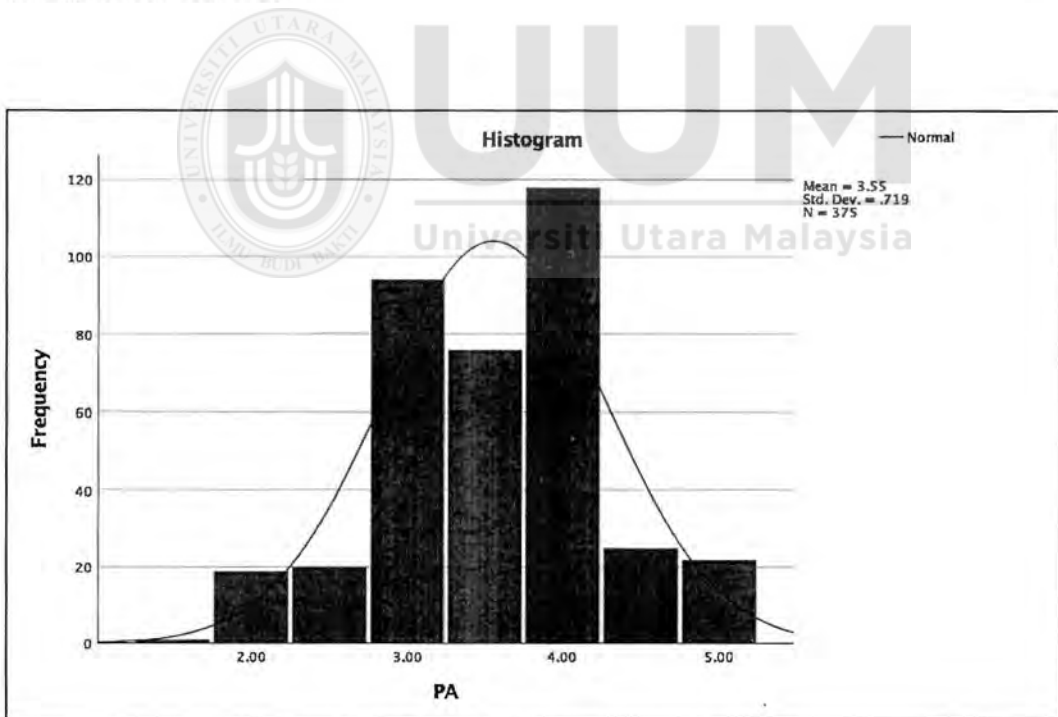


Figure 4.3. Histogram of the Normality Plot of the Perceived Authenticity (Mediator Variable)

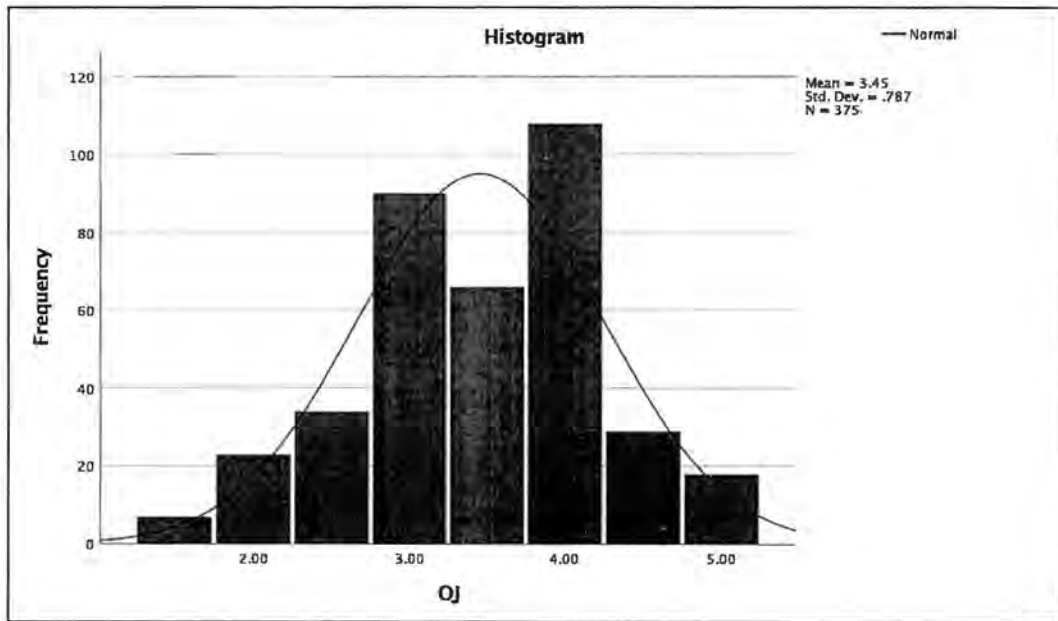


Figure 4.4. Histogram of the Normality Plot of the Organizational Justice (Mediator Variable)

Figures 4.5 to 4.8 display the normal probability Q-Q plot for all the variables. In these plots, a continuous alignment of points along a straight diagonal line, extending from the lower left corner to the upper right corner, indicates adherence to a normal distribution. Additionally, the accompanying stem-and-leaf plots presented in Figures 4.5 to 4.8 further corroborate that the target image data aligns closely with the expected normal distribution. The data points manifest a distinct linear arrangement, confirming that they fall within the bounds of the normal curve. This evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the obtained data are normally distributed.

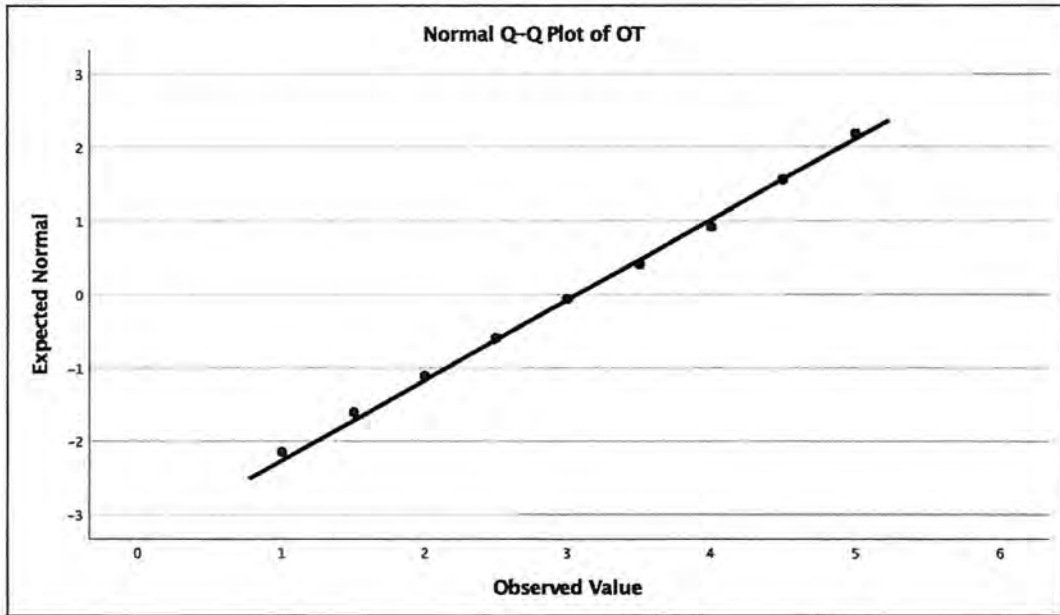


Figure 4.5. Normal Q-Q Plot of Organizational Trust (Dependent Variable)

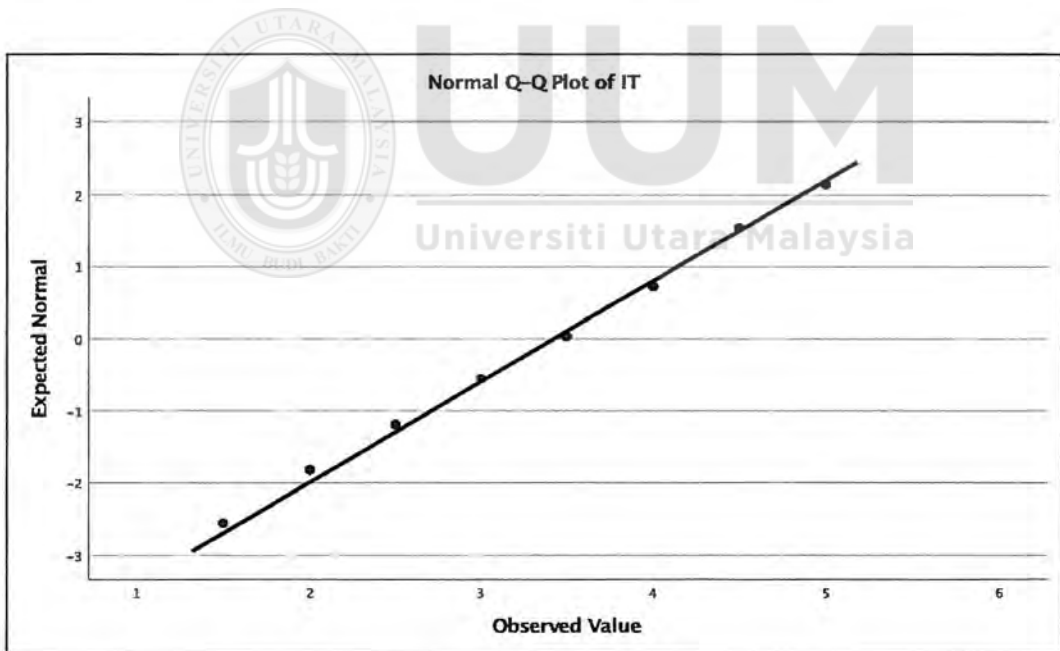


Figure 4.6. Normal Q-Q Plot of Information Transparency (Independent Variable)

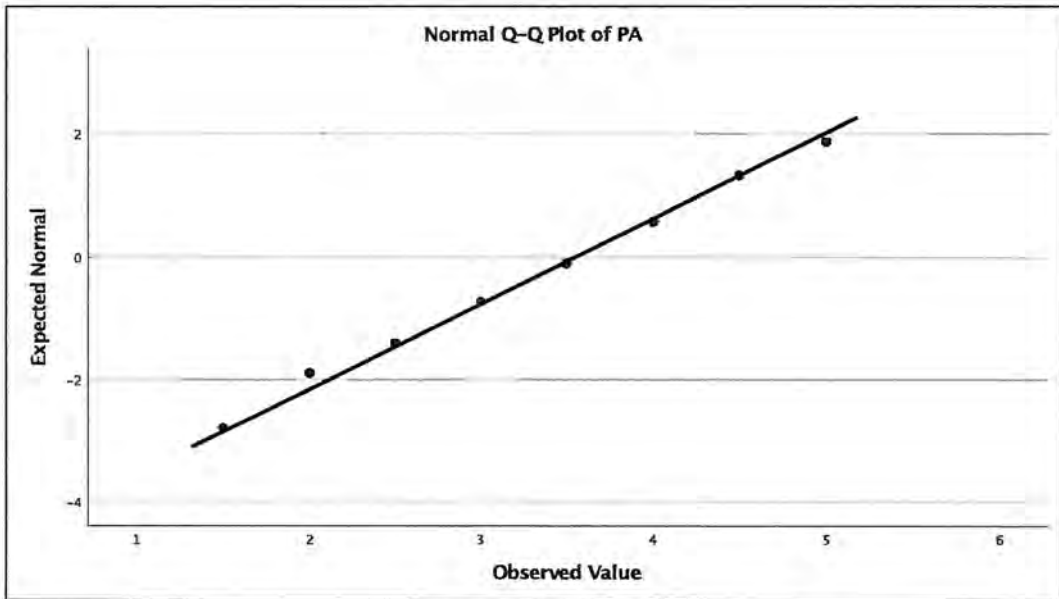


Figure 4.7. Normal Q-Q Plot of Perceived Authenticity (Mediator Variable)

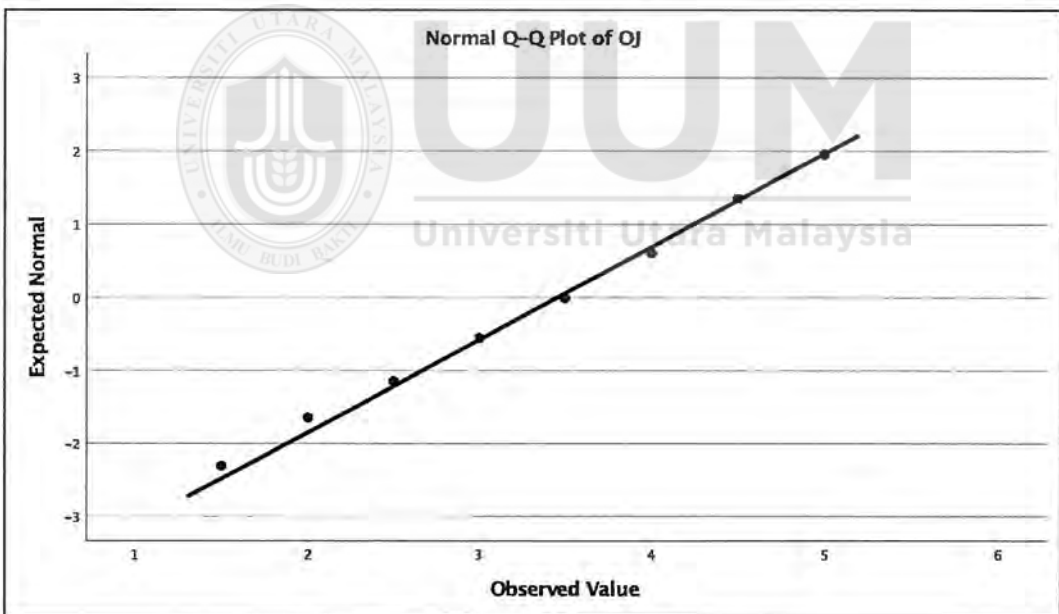


Figure 4.8. Normal Q-Q Plot of Organizational Justice (Mediator Variable)

Therefore, as can be seen from the above data and graphs, the dataset in this study has a normal data distribution. It is amenable to the use of PLS-SEM statistical analysis techniques to test causal theories between these variables (Hair et al., 2022). In this

study, PLS-SEM technology was used on SmartPLS 4.0 software to test the hypothesized relationship.

#### **4.4 Demographic Information**

To identify and comprehend the personal data of the respondents, it is essential to gather information pertaining to demographic data. The demographic section is divided into five categories: 1) gender, 2) age, 3) position in HEI, 4) years of teaching experience, and 5) field of expertise. The background profiles of the respondents are detailed in Table 4.2.

A total of 375 respondents participated in the survey. In terms of gender, 154 respondents (41.1%) identified as males, and 221 (58.9%) as females. Regarding age, 22.9% were below 30 years old, 48.0% were between 30 and 39 years old, 21.1% were between 40 and 49 years old, while only 8.0% were over 50 years old. When considering job positions in HEI, the majority of respondents held the title of lecturer (45.6%), followed by assistant lecturer (19.7%), associate professor (17.9%), academic staff (13.3%), and professor (3.5%). Additionally, within the 375 respondents, 33 had more than 20 years of teaching experience, 48 had between 16 and 20 years of experience, 73 had between 11 and 15 years of experience, 90 had between 5 and 10 years of experience, and 131 had less than 5 years of experience. The field of expertise taught by the respondents were diverse, with 70 (18.7%) respondents each teaching Education and Engineering respectively, followed by

Management with 45 (12.0%), Literature with 43 (11.5%), Economics with 35 (9.3%), Art with 35 (9.3%), Philosophy with 23 (6.1%), Law with 22 (5.9%), Science with 9 (2.4%), Medical with 8 (2.1%), Military science with 6 (1.6%), History with 5 (1.3), Agriculture with 4 (1.1%). Overall, the sample represents a wide range of demographics.

Table 4.2

*Demographic Profile of Respondents*

Description	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	154	41.1
Female	221	58.9
<b>Age</b>		
Below 30	86	22.9
30 - 39	180	48.0
40 - 49	79	21.1
50 & above	30	8.0
<b>Position in HEI</b>		
Professor	13	3.5
Associate Professor	67	17.9
Lecturer	171	45.6
Assistant Lecturer	74	19.7
Academic Staff	50	13.3
<b>Working Years</b>		
Less than 5 years	131	34.9
5 – 10 years	90	24.0
11– 15 years	73	19.5
16 – 20 years	48	12.8
over 20 years	33	8.8
<b>Field of Expertise</b>		
Philosophy	23	6.1
Economics	35	9.3
Law	22	5.9

Table 4.2 continued

Education	70	18.7
Literature	43	11.5
History	5	1.3
Science	9	2.4
Engineering	70	18.7
Agriculture	4	1.1
Medical	8	2.1
Military Science	6	1.6
Management	45	12.0
Art	35	9.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.5 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis was subsequently performed to outline the perceived levels of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust among the HEI lecturers in Jiangxi Province, China. Table 4.3 presents the means and standard deviations for each construct.

The findings in Table 4.3 reveal that for online public opinion crises, the mean values of all the variables pertaining to HEI lecturers' perceptions of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust range from 3.071 to 3.552. The standard deviation ranges from 0.715 to 0.915. Specifically, the variable of perceived authenticity yielded the highest mean value ( $M = 3.552$ ,  $SD = 0.719$ ), followed by organizational justice ( $M = 3.453$ ,  $SD = 0.787$ ), information transparency ( $M = 3.425$ ,  $SD = 0.715$ ), and organizational trust ( $M = 3.071$ ,  $SD = 0.915$ ).

Table 4.3

*Descriptive Statistics*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Information Transparency	375	3.425	0.715
Perceived Authenticity	375	3.552	0.719
Organizational Justice	375	3.453	0.787
Organizational Trust	375	3.071	0.915

This study utilized a five-point Likert scale as a measurement instrument, following the categorization by Koo and Yang (2025), where a mean of 1 signifies very poor rating, 2 indicates poor, 3 reflects average, 4 represents good, and 5 denotes excellent. Therefore, the perceived levels of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust among HEI lecturers in Jiangxi Province, China, are deemed to be moderate.

#### **4.6 Testing of Hypotheses**

This study utilized PLS-SEM to assess hypothesis one to hypothesis seven, focusing on the relationship between information transparency, perceived authenticity, organizational justice and organizational trust. Additionally, it investigated the correlation between the three dimensions of information transparency, disclosure, clarity, accuracy, and organizational trust.

The next analysis encompasses the path coefficients and bootstrapping results for mediation analysis. The P-value represents the probability of error, indicating that if the relationship holds 95% of the time, the researcher can accept the association. To establish the relationship between the two variables, the P-value should range from .05 to .01 for a significant relationship, and less than .01 for a strong significant relationship. Thus, the P-value should be less than .05 (Hair et al., 2022). The path coefficients are provided in Figure 4.9.

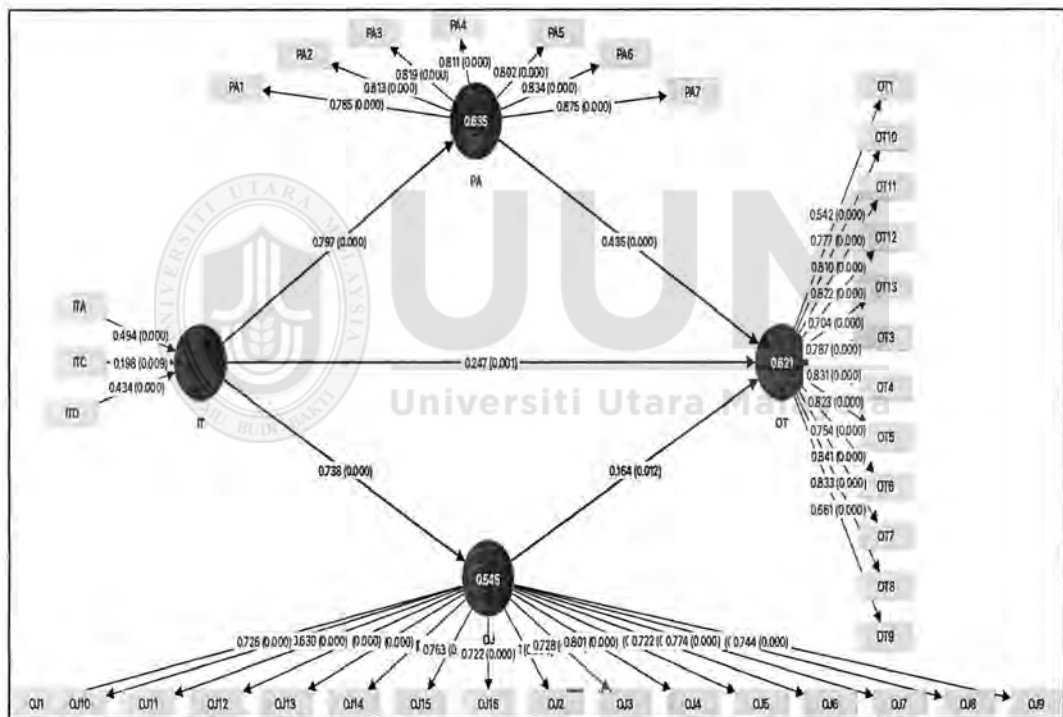


Figure 4.9. Path Coefficients

#### 4.6.1 Testing of the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

The study utilized Smart-PLS 4.0 software to analyze the  $\beta$ ,  $t$ -value, and  $p$ -value of each path through bootstrapping at a significance level of 5%. According to Hair et al.

(2022), a t-value exceeding 1.96 with  $p < .05$  reveals a significant relationship between the latent variables.

The PLS-SEM analysis evaluated H1, focusing on the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust. It also investigated the correlations between the three dimensions of information transparency—disclosure, clarity, and accuracy—and organizational trust. The researcher conducted a PLS-SEM path coefficient analysis to test the hypotheses, with the results illustrated in Table 4.4.

The hypothesis testing results indicate that information transparency (IT) exerts a significant positive impact on organizational trust (OT). The direct effect of IT on OT is quantified as  $\beta = 0.247$ , with a p-value of .001, and a t-value of 3.415. This finding confirms statistical significance at the 0.01 level. A further examination of the three dimensions of information transparency, namely disclosure (IT-D), clarity (IT-C), and accuracy (IT-A), shows that each dimension significantly contributes to enhancing organizational trust. Specifically, the effect of IT-D on OT is determined as  $\beta = 0.273$ , with a p-value less than .001, and a t-value of 20.912. Similarly, the effect of IT-C on OT is calculated at  $\beta = 0.255$ , also with a p-value less than .001, and a t-value of 20.568. Notably, the dimension of accuracy (IT-A) exhibits the strongest impact on OT, with  $\beta = 0.462$ , a p-value less than .001, and a t-value of 20.872.

Table 4.4

*Path Coefficient for H1*

	Relationships	Coefficient	S.D.	t-values	p-values	Decision
H1	IT -> OT	0.247	0.072	3.415	.001	Supported
H1a	IT-D -> OT	0.273	0.013	20.912	.000	Supported
H1b	IT-C -> OT	0.255	0.012	20.568	.000	Supported
H1c	IT-A -> OT	0.462	0.052	20.872	.000	Supported

Note. IT = Information Transparency; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-A= Information Transparency-Accuracy; OT = Organizational Trust.

These results underline the essential role of information transparency, particularly its accuracy dimension, in fostering trust within organizational contexts. Based on the model fit indicators mentioned above, H1, H1a, H1b, and H1c are supported.

#### 4.6.2 Testing the Relationship between Information Transparency and Perceived Authenticity during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

H2 was evaluated using PLS-SEM analysis to examine the association between information transparency and perceived authenticity. To assess this hypothesis, the researcher conducted a PLS-SEM path coefficient analysis, with the findings presented in Table 4.5.

The findings from this analysis provide evidence supporting the positive correlation between information transparency (IT) and perceived authenticity (PA). Specifically, the findings confirm a significant relationship between IT and PA, characterized by a regression coefficient of  $\beta = 0.797$ , with a p-value less than .001. The t-value of 35.04 notably surpasses the critical threshold of 1.96, underscoring the robustness of this

relationship. Furthermore, the relatively low standard deviation (S.D. = 0.023) indicates a stable and precise estimation of the effect. Consequently, H2 is supported, strengthening the importance of information transparency in enhancing perceived authenticity.

Table 4.5

*Path Coefficient for H2*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	t-value	p-value	Decision
IT -> PA	0.797	0.023	35.04	.000	Supported

*Note.* IT = Information Transparency; PA = Perceived Authenticity.

#### 4.6.3 Testing the Relationship between Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Trust during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

The PLS-SEM analysis was conducted to evaluate H3, specifically the relationship between perceived authenticity (PA) and organizational trust (OT). As presented in Table 4.6, the outcomes demonstrate that perceived authenticity significantly influences organizational trust. The analysis indicates a strong relationship, reflected by a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.435$ , a p-value of less than .001, and a t-value of 5.768, which significantly surpass the critical threshold of 1.96, thereby confirming statistical significance. Furthermore, the standard deviation (S.D. = 0.075) indicates a stable and reliable estimation of the effect. Consequently, H3 is supported.

Table 4.6

*Path Coefficient for H3*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	t-value	p-value	Decision
PA -> OT	0.435	0.075	5.768	.000	Supported

*Note.* PA = Perceived Authenticity; OT = Organizational Trust.

#### 4.6.4 Testing the Mediating Effect of Perceived Authenticity on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in China's HEIs

When utilizing Smart-PLS to examine the mediation effect, the Bootstrapping method is employed to assess the path model and introduce the mediation variables. These path models, containing t-values and path coefficients, are evaluated utilizing PLS-SEM algorithms and bootstrapping methods (Hair et al., 2021). The main goal is to assess the connection between the independent and mediating variables, and to evaluate the significance of the relationship between the mediating and dependent variables.

This study sought to examine the mediating effect of perceived authenticity on the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust, using SmartPLS 4.0 and the bootstrapping approach with a sample size of 375 cases and 5,000 sub-samples. The mediation effect was found to be significant as the corrected confidence interval did not cross 0 and the t-value exceeded 1.96 (MacKinnon, 2012).

The data presented in Table 4.7 indicates that PA serves as a significant mediating variable in the relationship between IT and OT. Specifically, the indirect effect of IT on OT through PA is quantified as  $\beta = 0.346$ , with a p-value less than .001. The 95% confidence interval for this effect ranges from [0.227, 0.459], which does not

encompass zero, thereby confirming the statistical significance of the mediating effect. Additionally, the T-value of 5.88 substantially exceeds the critical threshold of 1.96, further underscoring the robustness of this indirect relationship. Furthermore, when comparing the Beta values of IT → PA → OT and IT → OT (0.346, 0.247), it is apparent that they both have a positive direction.

Table 4.7

*Path Coefficient for H4*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
IT → PA → OT	0.346	0.059	5.88	.000	0.227	0.459	Supported

Note. IT = Information Transparency; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OT = Organizational Trust.

Therefore, these findings provide strong support for H4, highlighting the significant role of perceived authenticity in enhancing organizational trust by means of improved information transparency.

#### 4.6.5 Testing the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Justice during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

Table 4.8 presents evidence of a relationship between information transparency and organizational justice. The analysis yielded a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.738$ , with a significance level of  $p < .001$  and an impressive t-value of 27.268, significantly surpassing the critical threshold of 1.96. The associated standard deviation (S.D. =

0.027) indicates a precise and stable estimation of this effect. These findings substantiate the assertion that information transparency (IT) exerts a significant positive influence on organizational justice (OJ), thereby supporting for H5.

Table 4.8

*Path Coefficient for H5*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	t-value	p-value	Decision
IT → OJ	0.738	0.027	27.268	.000	Supported

*Note.* IT = Information Transparency; OJ = Organizational Justice.

#### 4.6.6 Testing the Relationship between Organizational Justice and Organizational Trust during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

Table 4.9 illustrates the significant relationship between organizational justice (OJ) and organizational trust (OT). The analysis revealed a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.164$ , with a p-value of .012 and a t-value of 2.508, surpassing the critical threshold of 1.96. This confirms the reliability of the results. Additionally, the standard deviation (S.D. = 0.066) indicates a stable estimation of the effect size. These findings strongly indicate that greater organizational justice correlates with higher levels of organizational trust, thereby substantiating H6.

Table 4.9

*Path Coefficient for H6*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	t-value	p-value	Decision
OJ → OT	0.164	0.066	2.508	.012	Supported

*Note.* OJ = Organizational Justice; OT = Organizational Trust.

#### 4.6.7 Testing the Mediating Effect of Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust during Public Opinion Crises in China's HEIs

Table 4.10 presents that organizational justice (OJ) plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between information transparency (IT) and organizational trust (OT). Specifically, the analysis revealed that the indirect effect of IT on OT through OJ is quantified at  $\beta = 0.121$ ,  $p < .015$ , with a 95% confidence interval of [0.03 to 0.223]. This interval excludes zero, thereby indicating statistical significance. Furthermore, the T-value of 2.432 surpasses the critical threshold of 1.96, which strengthens the credibility of the mediation effect identified. These findings imply that increased levels of information transparency can positively impact perceptions of organizational justice. In turn, enhanced perceptions of OJ foster greater organizational trust. This underscores the pivotal role that the notion of justice plays in facilitating the transition from transparency to trust within organizational contexts.

Table 4.10

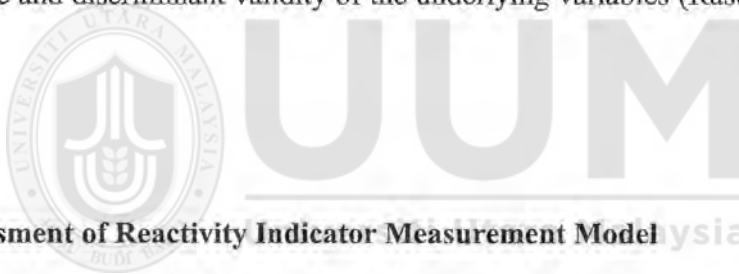
*Path Coefficient for H7*

Relationship	Coefficient	S.D.	T-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
IT -> OJ -> OT	0.121	0.05	2.432	.015	0.03	0.223	Supported

*Note.* IT = Information Transparency; OJ = Organizational Justice; OT = Organizational Trust.

#### 4.7 Assessment of Measurement Model

In this study, the researcher utilized Smart-PLS 4.0 to comprehensively assess the reliability of the measurement model and test the assumptions of the structural equation modeling. PLS-SEM was applied because the measurement model includes not only one-dimensional structures, but also the second-order concept of reflective-formative constructs formed by reflection. PLS-SEM offers distinct advantages over CB-SEM, particularly in handling higher-order metrics (Hair et al., 2022). As recommended by Sarstedt et al. (2021), the research employed the disjoint two-stage method of ordinal latent variable scoring to assess the measurement model, determine the reliability of individual items and internal consistency, and establish the convergence and discriminant validity of the underlying variables (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019).



#### **4.7.1 Assessment of Reactivity Indicator Measurement Model**

In the context of PLS-SEM analysis, the first step entailed the evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) depicted in Figure 4.10. This measurement model was instrumental in assessing the theoretical alignment and correlation of the indicators with specific variables, thereby validating the legitimacy and reliability of the questionnaire items (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019).

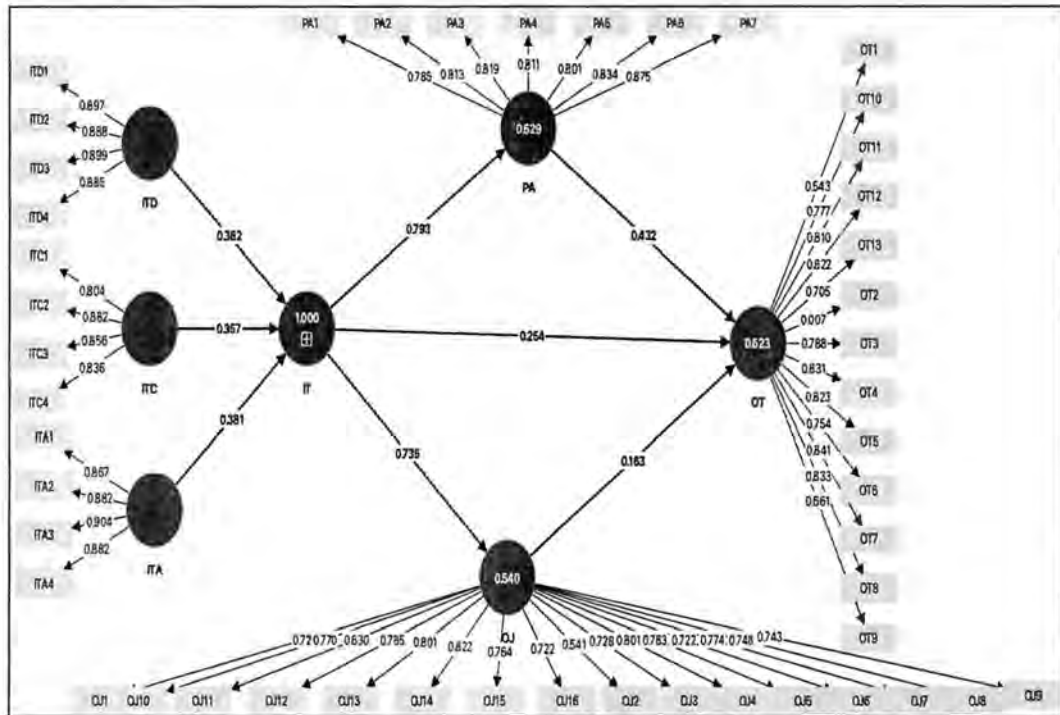


Figure 4.10. Measurement Model of Variables

The PLS-SEM analysis involved evaluating the measurement model for its validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2021). The determination of the relationship between variables (the structural model) relies on the validity and reliability of the measures. In Stage I, the researcher examined the Cronbach's alpha value and Composite Reliability (CR) value. To evaluate the convergent validity of the measurement model, this research used Indicator Loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results of each item in the reactivity index measurement model in this research are exhibited in Table 4.11.

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated by examining Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) (Burdziej, Haffer, Moszyńska, & Karwacki, 2024). Hair,

Risher, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019) stated that a Cronbach's alpha value higher than .70 indicates an acceptable reliability factor. Table 4.11 shows Cronbach's alpha values between .866 and .945 for all the variables. The measure of transparency consists of three dimensions, with the following Cronbach's alpha values: .915 for Dimension 1 (disclosure), .866 for Dimension 2 (clarity), and .907 for Dimension 3 (accuracy). The Information Transparency Scale demonstrated high reliability, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.942. The Cronbach's alpha value for perceived authenticity is .919. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha values for organizational justice and organizational trust are .945 and .919, respectively.

In terms of CR, Hair et al. (2022) stated that the value should range between 0 and 1, and recommended to be greater than .60 as a baseline. CR values between .60 and .70 suggest average internal consistency, while a range between .70 and .90 is considered more satisfactory. Based on the results in Table 4.11, the CR values range from .909 to .952, exceeding the recommended baseline of .70 (Hair et al., 2022), hence indicating the reliability of the measurement model.

Convergence validity measures the level of correlation between measurements of the same variable (Hair et al., 2022). In this study, the assessment of convergence validity was done by examining the factor loading and AVE values. As stated by Hair et al. (2021), standardized factor loading evaluates the reliability of individual items or indicators within a study's structure. Factor loadings should be 0.50 and higher. Items

with loadings below .50 should be removed from the build set (Hair et al., 2022). The results in Table 4.11 reveal that the loadings exceed the specified critical level of .50 for all items, with the exception of OT2. Therefore, the decision was made to exclude item OT2 from the analysis.

Hair et al. (2021) stated that AVE values of .50 or higher indicate satisfactory convergence validity. The results displayed in Table 4.11 indicates that the AVE values range between .548 and .796. All the AVE values exceed the baseline value of .50 for all the variables (Hair et al., 2021), demonstrating the effectiveness of the variable's convergence.

Table 4.11  
*First-order-reactivity Indicator Measurement Model Test Results*

Variable Name	Items	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Disclosure	IT-D1	.897	.915	.940	.796
	IT-D2	.888			
	IT-D3	.899			
	IT-D4	.885			
Sub-dimension of Information Transparency: Clarity	IT-C1	.804	.866	.909	.714
	IT-C2	.882			
	IT-C3	.856			
	IT-C4	.836			

Table 4.11 continued

Sub-dimension of					
Information Transparency: Accuracy	IT-A1	.867	.907	.935	.781
	IT-A2	.882			
	IT-A3	.904			
	IT-A4	.882			
Perceived Authenticity	PA1	.785	.919	.935	.673
	PA2	.813			
	PA3	.819			
	PA4	.811			
	PA5	.801			
	PA6	.834			
	PA7	.875			
Organizational Justice	OJ1	.726	.945	.952	.554
	OJ2	.541			
	OJ3	.728			
	OJ4	.801			
	OJ5	.783			
	OJ6	.722			
	OJ7	.774			
	OJ8	.748			
	OJ9	.743			
	OJ10	.770			
	OJ11	.630			
	OJ12	.785			
	OJ13	.801			
	OJ14	.822			
	OJ15	.764			
	OJ16	.722			
Organizational Trust	OT1	.543	.919	.935	.548
	OT2	.007			
	OT3	.788			
	OT4	.831			
	OT5	.823			
	OT6	.754			
	OT7	.841			

Table 4.11 continued

OT8	.833
OT9	.661
OT10	.777
OT11	.810
OT12	.822
OT13	.705

*Note.* IT = Information Transparency; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OJ = Organizational Justice; OT = Organizational Trust.

To evaluate the external discriminant validity of the reactivity index measurement model, the current study employed the Fornell-Larcker criterion, Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), and Cross-Loadings (Hair et al., 2019). In general, a measurement model demonstrates good external discrimination validity when the Fornell-Larcker value of one concept surpasses the correlation of any other concept. In this study, discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the square root of the AVE for each variable with the correlations displayed in the correlation matrix (Hair et al., 2022). Since there are two mediations in parallel in the model, the Fornell-Larcker method of the square root of the variable was used separately for evaluation. Table 4.12 and Table 4.13 present the results of the assessment. The bold values in the table indicate the square root value of AVE. It is evident from the table that the square root value of AVE exceeds the correlation of the highest variable with any other variable. Consequently, the discriminant validity of the variables was established (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 4.12

*Fornell-Larcker Method*

	<b>IT-A</b>	<b>IT-C</b>	<b>IT-D</b>	<b>OT</b>	<b>PA</b>
<b>IT-A</b>	<b>0.884</b>				
<b>IT-C</b>	0.76	<b>0.845</b>			
<b>IT-D</b>	0.584	0.753	<b>0.892</b>		
<b>OT</b>	0.599	0.647	0.669	<b>0.77</b>	
<b>PA</b>	0.754	0.719	0.651	0.762	<b>0.82</b>

*Note.* OT = Organizational Trust; IT = Information Transparency; IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OJ = Organizational Justice

Table 4.13

*Fornell-Larcker Method*

	<b>IT-A</b>	<b>IT-C</b>	<b>IT-D</b>	<b>OJ</b>	<b>OT</b>
<b>IT-A</b>	<b>0.917</b>				
<b>IT-C</b>	0.822	<b>0.882</b>			
<b>IT-D</b>	0.645	0.788	<b>0.915</b>		
<b>OJ</b>	0.72	0.743	0.736	<b>0.788</b>	
<b>OT</b>	0.669	0.718	0.741	0.764	<b>0.802</b>

*Note.* OT = Organizational Trust; IT = Information Transparency; IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OJ = Organizational Justice.

The HTMT ratio is an essential tool for evaluating the model, surpassing the outdated Fornell-Larker criterion for discriminant validity. According to the HTMT ratio criteria, values should be below 0.90, indicating discriminant validity in the reflective structure (Hair et al., 2022). As presented in Table 4.14, all the variables met the discriminant validity criteria based on the HTMT guidelines.

Table 4.14

*Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT)*

	IT-A	IT-C	IT-D	OJ	OT	PA
<b>IT-A</b>						
<b>IT-C</b>	0.857					
<b>IT-D</b>	0.641	0.845				
<b>OJ</b>	0.714	0.724	0.688			
<b>OT</b>	0.651	0.719	0.724	0.73		
<b>PA</b>	0.826	0.804	0.709	0.849	0.814	

Note. OT = Organizational Trust; IT = Information Transparency; IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OJ = Organizational Justice.

Next, Hair et al. (2022) proposed that the distinction between a concept and other concepts can be confirmed when the external load of the corresponding concept's index is greater than any cross-load with other concepts. The cross-loading values presented in Table 4.15 illustrate the item rows and columns for the latent variables. All items loaded higher on their own constructs than on others. This indicates that the measurement model exhibits strong discriminant validity.

Table 4.15

*Cross Loading*

	IT	ITA	ITC	ITD	OJ	OT	PA
<b>ITA1</b>	<b>0.765</b>	<b>0.867</b>	0.679	0.507	0.554	0.504	0.640
<b>ITA2</b>	<b>0.790</b>	<b>0.882</b>	0.689	0.546	0.626	0.552	0.676
<b>ITA3</b>	<b>0.774</b>	<b>0.904</b>	0.670	0.502	0.557	0.488	0.654
<b>ITA4</b>	<b>0.763</b>	<b>0.882</b>	0.648	0.510	0.604	0.574	0.693
<b>ITC1</b>	<b>0.756</b>	0.573	<b>0.804</b>	0.657	0.544	0.550	0.572
<b>ITC2</b>	<b>0.821</b>	0.692	<b>0.882</b>	0.635	0.575	0.560	0.650

Table 4.15 continued

ITC3	<b>0.802</b>	0.615	<b>0.856</b>	0.685	0.567	0.590	0.633
ITC4	<b>0.775</b>	0.686	<b>0.836</b>	0.567	0.540	0.487	0.573
ITD1	<b>0.771</b>	0.514	0.649	<b>0.897</b>	0.575	0.603	0.601
ITD2	<b>0.771</b>	0.514	0.663	<b>0.888</b>	0.558	0.573	0.551
ITD3	<b>0.775</b>	0.512	0.662	<b>0.899</b>	0.559	0.598	0.574
ITD4	<b>0.799</b>	0.544	0.710	<b>0.885</b>	0.613	0.612	0.597
OJ1	0.630	0.509	0.563	0.615	<b>0.726</b>	0.639	0.656
OJ2	0.445	0.333	0.390	0.467	<b>0.541</b>	0.456	0.500
OJ3	0.542	0.482	0.475	0.494	<b>0.728</b>	0.487	0.619
OJ4	0.617	0.540	0.531	0.581	<b>0.801</b>	0.560	0.681
OJ5	0.606	0.583	0.550	0.490	<b>0.783</b>	0.547	0.676
OJ6	0.552	0.471	0.501	0.507	<b>0.722</b>	0.516	0.557
OJ7	0.568	0.560	0.536	0.427	<b>0.774</b>	0.547	0.651
OJ8	0.509	0.504	0.445	0.413	<b>0.748</b>	0.450	0.524
OJ9	0.548	0.521	0.497	0.452	<b>0.743</b>	0.462	0.557
OJ10	0.557	0.528	0.485	0.477	<b>0.770</b>	0.491	0.582
OJ11	0.406	0.448	0.377	0.263	<b>0.630</b>	0.364	0.482
OJ12	0.600	0.514	0.539	0.553	<b>0.785</b>	0.547	0.627
OJ13	0.533	0.488	0.483	0.457	<b>0.801</b>	0.523	0.589
OJ14	0.538	0.498	0.485	0.459	<b>0.822</b>	0.514	0.600
OJ15	0.532	0.449	0.486	0.490	<b>0.764</b>	0.548	0.557
OJ16	0.487	0.417	0.431	0.455	<b>0.722</b>	0.501	0.518
OT1	0.386	0.285	0.351	0.398	0.383	<b>0.543</b>	0.375
OT3	0.522	0.434	0.467	0.496	0.488	<b>0.787</b>	0.545
OT4	0.563	0.471	0.496	0.540	0.555	<b>0.830</b>	0.631
OT5	0.549	0.487	0.502	0.480	0.501	<b>0.823</b>	0.588
OT6	0.514	0.450	0.468	0.460	0.506	<b>0.754</b>	0.579
OT7	0.616	0.486	0.551	0.611	0.574	<b>0.841</b>	0.651
OT8	0.626	0.516	0.583	0.580	0.554	<b>0.833</b>	0.645
OT9	0.409	0.402	0.365	0.327	0.498	<b>0.661</b>	0.502
OT10	0.587	0.513	0.534	0.524	0.561	<b>0.777</b>	0.584
OT11	0.615	0.539	0.558	0.551	0.581	<b>0.810</b>	0.646
OT12	0.627	0.523	0.559	0.597	0.626	<b>0.822</b>	0.675
OT13	0.529	0.372	0.488	0.557	0.523	<b>0.704</b>	0.548
PA1	0.654	0.665	0.584	0.504	0.618	0.584	<b>0.785</b>
PA2	0.671	0.652	0.636	0.511	0.622	0.654	<b>0.813</b>
PA3	0.655	0.555	0.619	0.582	0.621	0.655	<b>0.819</b>
PA4	0.647	0.565	0.586	0.581	0.632	0.617	<b>0.811</b>
PA5	0.619	0.644	0.545	0.471	0.684	0.577	<b>0.801</b>
PA6	0.607	0.596	0.531	0.498	0.692	0.608	<b>0.834</b>

Table 4.15 continued

<b>PA7</b>	0.693	0.650	0.620	0.585	0.690	0.671	<b>0.875</b>
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Note. OT = Organizational Trust; IT = Information Transparency; IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure; PA = Perceived Authenticity; OJ = Organizational Justice.

In sum, the indicators of the measurement model, namely the Fornell-Larcker values, Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), and crossing loadings, in the first-order reactivity index stage, all satisfy the necessary statistical criteria. Consequently, all first-order measurement models in this research exhibit favorable reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

#### 4.7.2 Assessment of Formative Indicator Measurement Model

In the assessment of the measurement model with formative indicators, the researcher carefully examined the collinearity issue, significance level, and correlation of each formative index. Moving on to the second stage, the researcher employed the potential scores of the three dimensions of information transparency acquired in the initial phase namely accuracy, clarity, and disclosure as formative indicators for the secondary structure. Initially, the 'weighted' score for each dimension/metric was calculated by multiplying the potential score for each dimension/metric by its PLS weight. The weighted scores were then added together to generate a composite score of the formative structure. Subsequently, the three weighted scores were correlated with the composite score to generate dimension-to-structure correlations. The results of the

second-order two-steps formative index measurement model test are displayed in Table 4.16.

According to Marcoulides and Raykov (2019), a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) higher than 5 indicates a potential covariance problem for the formative indicator. The VIF values between the formative indicators in this study, along with the weights and loadings on their respective concepts, are presented in Table 4.16. The study found that the VIF of all three formative indicators (IT-A, IT-C, and IT-D) is less than 5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity and confirming that each indicator contributes uniquely to the formative construct. Moreover, this study also determined that the outer weights of the three formative indicators all satisfied the statistical requirements. Consequently, all the formative indicator measurement models in this study met the statistical standards, enabling further normal structural equation modeling to be conducted.

Table 4.16  
Second-Order-Two Steps-formative Index Measurement Model Test Results

Item	Outer weights	T-value	VIF
IT-A	0.494	7.925	2.368
IT-C	0.198	2.6	3.597
IT-D	0.434	6.864	2.308

*Note.* IT-A = Information Transparency-Accuracy; IT-C = Information Transparency-Clarity; IT-D = Information Transparency-Disclosure.

#### 4.8 Assessment of Structural Model

Following the evaluation of the measured model's quality, the subsequent step in the PLS-SEM analysis involves examining the structural model. The assessment of the structural model begins with an evaluation of the relationship between the independent and mediating variables. Employing the path algorithm in the PLS-SEM, the path coefficient is utilized to estimate the relationship between the structural components. This coefficient represents the hypothetical relationships between the different structures. Subsequently, the outcomes of the structural model, including R-squared ( $R^2$ ), effect size ( $F^2$ ), blindfolding, and predicted correlation ( $Q^2$ ) will be presented under specific subheadings. The PLS-SEM algorithm results are shown in Figure 4.11.

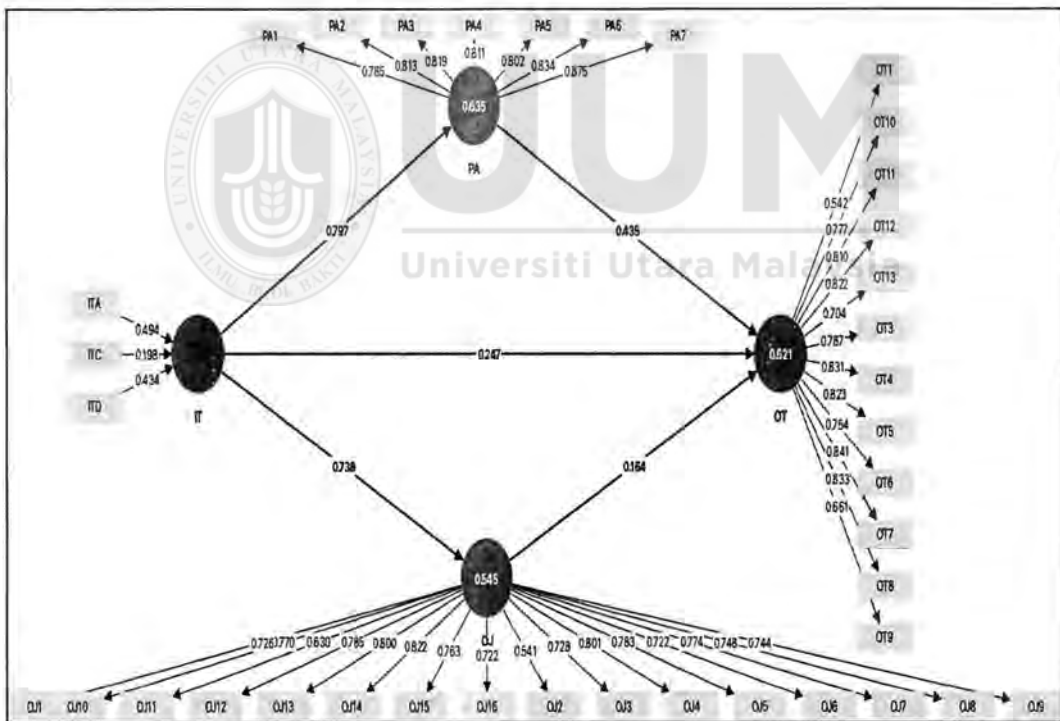


Figure 4.11. PLS Algorithm Direct and Indirect Relationship

#### 4.8.1 Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ )

In the realm of structural modeling, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of the dependent variable serves as a widely employed yardstick (Hair et al., 2019).  $R^2$  represents the proportion of variability in the dependent variable that can be explained by one or more predictor variables in the model. Hair et al. (2019) proposed thresholds for evaluating  $R^2$ : .75, .50, and .25 correspond to significant, moderate, and weak  $R^2$  values, respectively. In the present study, the  $R^2$  values for organizational justice (.545), organizational trust (.621), and perceived authenticity (.635) are detailed in Table 4.17. Hence, the model has moderate to strong explanatory power. This suggests that the proposed independent variables explain a substantial proportion of the variance in these constructs, supporting the robustness of the structural model.

Table 4.17

*Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ )*

<b>Endogenous Variables</b>	<b>R-square</b>
Organizational Justice	.545
Organizational Trust	.621
Perceived Authenticity	.635

#### 4.8.2 Assessment of Effect Size ( $F^2$ )

Following the computation of R-squared values, assessing the effect size ( $F^2$ ) of each predictor on its associated endogenous variable is crucial for understanding the relative importance of each latent construct (Hair et al., 2022). As suggested by Martin and Martinez (2023), the effect size ( $F^2$ ) scale is defined as small (.02), medium (.15), and

large (.35) for explaining the predicted values. The effect sizes for the potential variables of the structural model are outlined in Table 4.18.

In Table 4.18, the  $F^2$  values indicate that information transparency has a strong effect on both organizational justice ( $f^2 = 1.197$ ) and perceived authenticity ( $f^2 = 1.743$ ), confirming its critical role in shaping these mediators. However, its direct effect on organizational trust is relatively small ( $f^2 = 0.054$ ). Perceived authenticity shows a nearly moderate effect ( $f^2 = 0.136$ ), while organizational justice exerts only a minimal effect ( $f^2 = 0.024$ ) on organizational trust.

Table 4.18

*Effect Size ( $F^2$ )*

	OJ	OT	PA
IT	1.197	.054	1.743
PA		.136	
OJ		.024	

*Note.* IT = Information Transparency; OJ = Organizational Justice; OT = Organizational Trust; PA = Perceived Authenticity.

#### 4.8.3 Assessment of Predictive Relevance ( $Q^2$ )

In addition to examining the  $R^2$  value and effect size ( $F^2$ ) of the structural model, it is also essential to evaluate the model's predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). The Stone-Geisser criterion is utilized for this purpose, presuming that the structural model is responsible for providing the predictive evidence of the endogenous variable indicator. This study

adopted the Stone-Geisser criterion to assess  $Q^2$ , using a blindfold process to obtain cross-validation redundancy of the endogenous variables, as illustrated in Table 4.19 (Hair et al., 2019).

The findings presented in Table 4.19 clearly demonstrate that the  $Q^2$  values for organizational justice (.295), organizational trust (.363), and perceived authenticity (.423) are all greater than zero. As stated by Hair et al. (2019), this indicates a significant predictive correlation in the current model. A  $Q^2$  above zero implies a model with predictive correlation, while a  $Q^2$  value below zero suggests a lack of predictive correlation in the model. Therefore, there is a significant predictive correlation in this model.



Table 4.19

*Predictive Relevance ( $Q^2$ )*

	SSO	SSE	$Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)$
Organizational Justice	6000	4228.197	.295
Organizational Trust	4500	2867.357	.363
Perceived Authenticity	2625	1513.472	.423

#### 4.9 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Building on the findings from the data analysis, all ten hypotheses were found to be supported. To summarize, Table 4.20 below presents the results of the overall hypothesis testing in this research.

Table 4.20

*Summary of Hypotheses Testing*

<b>H</b>	<b>Statement of Hypotheses</b>	<b>Decision</b>
H1	There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H1a	There is a significant relationship between information disclosure and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H1b	There is a significant relationship between information clarity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H1c	There is a significant relationship between information accuracy and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H2	There is a significant relationship between information transparency and perceived authenticity during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H3	There is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H4	Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H5	There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational justice during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H6	There is a significant relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported
H7	Organizational justice mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.	Supported

**4.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the results of the study. The profile of the respondents was described using the SPSS technique, followed by the application of PLS-SEM analysis to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measures. Moreover, the bootstrapping technique in PLS-SEM analysis was employed to examine the research hypotheses. The results suggested that the measurement model exhibits strong evidence of reliability, convergence validity, and discriminant validity, thereby meeting the necessary criteria. Following the assessment of the measurement model, the structural model was also scrutinized. In addition, the results of hypotheses testing analysis using the PLS-SEM bootstrap method were presented. The upcoming chapter will explore these findings in depth, highlight the limitations and implications of the study, and provide recommendations for future research.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the primary findings of the study are presented and discussed, drawing connections to the research question. Furthermore, there is a comprehensive discussion of the findings and their implications from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Additionally, this chapter addresses the study's limitations and proposes future research directions. Lastly, this chapter provides a general conclusion for this research.

#### 5.2 Summary of the Study

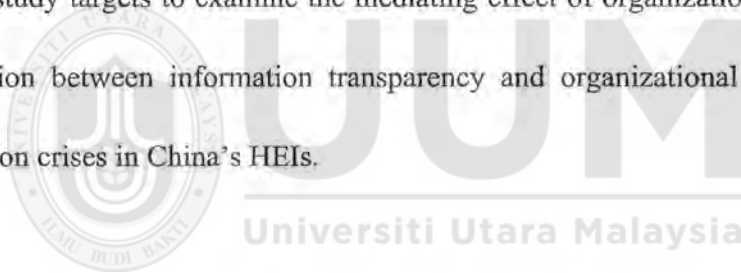
The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of information transparency, perceived authenticity and organizational justice on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. This study proposes and empirically validates an integrated framework in which information transparency influences organizational trust through the mediating roles of perceived authenticity and organizational justice. Furthermore, it adapts the Signaling Theory and Social Exchange Theory to the non-market, crisis-driven environment of higher education, offering new theoretical insights into trust formation in academic institutions. Additionally, the study evaluates the levels of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust perceived by lecturers during public opinion crises in Jiangxi Province, China. It specifically examines the direct impact of lecturers' perceived information transparency on organizational trust and explores the mediating

mechanism of lecturers' perceived authenticity and organizational justice on this correlation.

Numerous researchers claimed that transparent communication is fundamental to fostering trust within organizations (Holland et al., 2021; Yang & Miao, 2022; Yue et al., 2019). Providing accurate and openly communicated information can narrow the information gaps, curb the spread of misinformation, reduce panic among internal stakeholders such as lecturers, and bolster trust (Calonge et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2019). Schnackenberg et al. (2021) categorized transparency into three dimensions: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. However, prior research has primarily focused on information transparency in corporate and governmental contexts, with limited studies examining its influence on organizational trust within HEIs, particularly from the perspective of lecturers (Lewicka, 2022; Niedlich et al., 2021).

Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive research investigating the mediating roles of perceived authenticity and organizational justice in this relationship within HEIs, as most studies had explored these constructs in for-profit organizational settings (Emmanuel, 2025; Rim, Dong, & Zhang, 2024; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). To address these gaps, this study introduces perceived authenticity and organizational justice as mediating variables to examine how information transparency affects lecturers' organizational trust in HEIs.

Building upon the identified issues contained within this study and the thorough literature review provided in Chapters One and Two, this research aims to achieve the following objectives. First, this study aims to assess the levels of information transparency, authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust perceived by lecturers during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. Second, it intends to determine the direct impact of information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. Third, this research aims to examine the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. Lastly, the study targets to examine the mediating effect of organizational justice in the interaction between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.



In consideration of the outlined research objectives and arguments, Chapter Two introduced a conceptual model that illustrates the relationship among the independent, mediating, and dependent variables. To test the developed framework, a quantitative approach was employed in this study. Questionnaire survey was applied to gather variable data, and data collection was based on proportional stratified random sampling. The instrument tools were adapted from previous studies: the Organizational Trust Questionnaire from Rawlins (2008), the Information Transparency Questionnaire from Schnackenberg et al. (2021), the Perceived Authenticity

Questionnaire from Shen and Kim (2012), and the Organizational Justice Questionnaire from Colquitt (2001).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the measurement instrument, the researcher sought feedback from two HEI professors in China in related fields to evaluate the effectiveness of all the items in the adapted questionnaire for measuring the content of the current study. After making adjustments to the original scale, considering the study's location in China, the researchers also sought the help of two English-speaking professional lecturers to assess the applicability of translating the questionnaire into Chinese. The proof of instrument validation and the translation certification letter are provided in Appendix B and Appendix C. The quantitative phase of the data collection involved a total of 430 lecturers from five HEIs in Jiangxi Province (Nanchang University, Jiangxi Normal University, Yichun University, Jingdezhen University, Xinyu University). The findings of the study will be discussed in the following section.

### **5.3 Discussion of Research Findings**

This section provides a detailed discussion of the research questions and findings. Specifically, the section explores the levels of information transparency, perceived authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust. It also examines the interrelationship between information transparency, organizational trust, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice as perceived by lecturers in the context of the public opinion crisis in HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China.

The researcher conducted reliability and validity analysis, internal consistency, convergence validity, and discriminant validity tests. The calculated values were within acceptable ranges, supporting the model. Tables 4.4 to 4.10 present the results of the structural model with coefficients for each path indicating the relationship between the structures in the model (Hair et al., 2019). The significance of paths and assumptions in the path model was tested using the Bootstrapping technique of SmartPLS, as illustrated in Table 4.20 in the previous chapter. The study validated ten hypotheses.

### **5.3.1 The Level of Information Transparency, Perceived Authenticity, Organizational Justice, and Organizational Trust Perceived by Lecturers**

This section addresses the first research question: What are the levels of information transparency, perceived authenticity, organizational justice, and organizational trust perceived by lecturers in HEIs during public opinion crises in China? Based on descriptive statistics presented in Table 4.3, all four variables recorded moderate mean values.

Organizational trust exhibited the lowest mean score among the variables. This finding aligns with Niedlich et al. (2021) who emphasized that trust within educational institutions is often fragile and heavily influenced by perceived justice, communication effectiveness, and the broader institutional environment. Similarly, Toropova, Myrberg and Johansson (2021) identified unsatisfactory working conditions and

limited faculty involvement in decision-making as key factors diminishing trust among lecturers. The low mean score for organizational trust in this study may thus reflect systemic challenges such as hierarchical governance and insufficient faculty participation in institutional affairs, which are prevalent issues in China's public HEIs.

Perceived authenticity recorded a relatively higher mean value than the other variables, suggesting that a majority of the respondents view the information disseminated by their institutions as credible. This finding is consistent with Rim et al. (2024) who demonstrated that transparent and consistent communication enhances stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity, thereby fostering trust. However, the moderate standard deviation in the current study highlights variability in authenticity perceptions, possibly due to the frequency of public opinion incidents in HEIs in Jiangxi, which had heightened stakeholders' sensitivity to institutional communication practices.

The moderate levels of information transparency and organizational justice suggest that while the HEIs have initiated measures to improve these dimensions, there is still considerable room for enhancement. Emmanuel (2025) pointed out that organizational transparency alone does not automatically translate into trust; it must be accompanied by justice and active stakeholder engagement. Similarly, Lin and Shin (2021) argued that in China's HEIs, perceptions of justice and transparent decision-making processes are pivotal in fostering trust, especially during crises.

In summary, while the findings confirm that information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice are integral to fostering organizational trust, these relationships are influenced by contextual factors specific to HEIs in Jiangxi Province. HEIs must adopt a more holistic approach that integrates transparency with authentic engagement and equitable practices to effectively enhance organizational trust.

### **5.3.2 The Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust**

This section discusses the findings of the second research question: What is the effect of information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crisis of HEIs in China? The proposed hypotheses aim to establish the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust as follows:

H1: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1a: There is a significant relationship between information disclosure and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1b: There is a significant relationship between information clarity and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

H1c: There is a significant relationship between information accuracy and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

The findings of this study reveal that all three dimensions of information transparency positively influence organizational trust. Among them, accuracy demonstrates the strongest impact, indicating that lecturers prioritize the correctness and reliability of information over other dimensions when assessing the trustworthiness of their institutions during crises.

This outcome aligns with prior research emphasizing the pivotal role of transparency in trust formation, particularly within for-profit organizations (Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Hossiep et al., 2024; Lee & Li, 2021; Schnackenberg et al., 2021; Stuckey, 2024).

Studies have highlighted that, in crisis situations, transparent communication serves as a critical mechanism for mitigating dissatisfaction and restoring confidence (Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022; Zheng, 2023a). Transparent and precise information is essential in reducing uncertainties and reassuring stakeholders, as inconsistency or misinformation within official communications can severely undermine trust (Porumbescu, Meijer, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2022). Additionally, transparency enhances organizational accountability and credibility (Suharyati, Hidayat, Sumardi, & Abidin, 2021).

However, existing literature predominantly focuses on corporate or public administration contexts, with limited empirical research addressing the role of information transparency in non-profit organizations such as HEIs (Calonge et al., 2021; Emmanuel, 2025; Rim et al., 2024). HEIs operate under unique dynamics, where

stakeholders, particularly lecturers, are directly involved and highly sensitive to institutional crisis communication (Xu, 2019). Inadequate transparency in such settings often leads to information asymmetry, which accelerates the spread of rumors and misinformation (Liu et al., 2024; Wang & Guan, 2023).

A critical observation from this study is that accuracy emerged as the most influential dimension, which contrasts with prior research that positioned clarity as the central component of transparency in the public sector (Jaradat & Oudat, 2025). This deviation suggests a context-specific shift in stakeholder priorities. During public opinion crises, stakeholders may value accuracy (truthfulness and correctness of information) over clarity (ease of understanding). This finding implies that in high-stakes environments, stakeholders prefer accurate yet complex information over oversimplified but potentially less reliable messages.

This insight is significant because it challenges the traditional assumption that clarity is universally the most critical aspect of transparency work (Jaradat & Oudat, 2025). It highlights the need for HEIs to reevaluate their communication strategies, emphasizing the accurate disclosure of facts, even if the information requires further contextual explanation. In fact, simplifying information at the expense of accuracy may undermine trust among informed stakeholders (such as lecturers) who need accurate and credible information during a crisis (Calonge et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2025; McCarthy, 2024).

Moreover, the findings echo Calonge et al. (2021) and Holland et al. (2021) who argued that in knowledge-intensive institutions like HEIs, the demand for detailed, accurate disclosures outweighs the desire for overly simplified narratives. This is particularly pertinent in Jiangxi's HEIs, where recent public opinion incidents have heightened lecturers' scrutiny of institutional communication.

Overall, this study confirms that while all dimensions of transparency contribute to organizational trust, accuracy stands out as the most critical factor during crisis conditions in HEIs. This calls for HEIs to adopt nuanced communication strategies that prioritize accuracy while ensuring sufficient clarity to avoid misinterpretation. Such strategies are essential for reducing misinformation, alleviating stakeholder anxiety, and ultimately fostering stronger trust relationships (Yue et al., 2019; Rim et al., 2024).

### **5.3.3 The Relationship between Information Transparency and Perceived Authenticity**

This section investigates the relationship between information transparency and perceived authenticity, with the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and perceived authenticity during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

The results of the path coefficient analysis (refer to Table 4.5) confirm a statistically significant positive correlation between information transparency and perceived authenticity. This finding indicates that when HEIs provide comprehensive, accurate, and timely information, lecturers are more likely to perceive such information as authentic, fostering stronger trust in institutional communications.

This relationship can be explained through the lens of the Signaling Theory, which posits that transparent information dissemination serves as a credible signal, reducing information asymmetry and enhancing stakeholders' perception of authenticity (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). In crisis situations, where misinformation and uncertainty are prevalent, transparency becomes a critical mechanism to reaffirm institutional credibility and signal integrity to internal stakeholders.

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated this linkage. For instance, Hofmann and Strobel (2020) emphasized that transparent communication enhances perceived authenticity by aligning the content of messages with observable actions and organizational realities. Similarly, Busser and Shulga (2019) found that transparency fosters a sense of authenticity by mitigating ambiguity and reinforcing organizational sincerity.

Research by Rim et al. (2024) expanded this perspective by showing that perceived authenticity serves as a crucial mediator in stakeholder evaluations of corporate

transparency, particularly during reputational crises. In the context of HEIs, where lecturers play a dual role as employees and communicators to external audiences, the authenticity of institutional information is pivotal in shaping their trust and willingness to support official narratives.

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2021) highlighted that transparent information practices enhance stakeholders' perceived credibility, which in turn fosters authenticity perceptions. This is especially relevant in crisis scenarios where stakeholders scrutinize not only the content, but also the intent behind information dissemination.

In the context of this study, lecturers' perception of authenticity is influenced not merely by the volume of disclosed information, but also by the clarity, accuracy, and alignment of such information with their lived experiences. This underscores the necessity for HEIs to adopt holistic transparency strategies that go beyond formal disclosures to include proactive engagement and feedback mechanisms, as suggested by Schnackenberg et al. (2021).

In summary, the findings substantiate that enhanced information transparency significantly elevates perceived authenticity, thereby reinforcing the credibility and trustworthiness of HEIs during public opinion crises. However, the impact of transparency on authenticity is contingent upon the consistency between

communicated messages and actual organizational practices, a nuance that institutions must address to sustain long-term trust.

#### **5.3.4 The Relationship between Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Trust**

This section seeks to examine the relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust, with the proposed assumption as follows:

H3: There is a significant relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust during public opinion crises HEIs in China's HEIs.

Based on the path coefficient analysis results in Table 4.6, perceived authenticity exhibits a significant positive effect on organizational trust. This suggests that when lecturers perceive institutional communications as authentic, their level of trust towards the institution increases. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on external stakeholders such as customers or the general public (Um, 2022; Abhinandan, 2020), this study provides empirical evidence on how perceived authenticity influences internal stakeholders (lecturers) in the context of HEIs during public opinion crises.

However, this finding challenges the conventional assumption that transparency alone is sufficient to build trust. Rim et al. (2024) and Emmanuel (2025) argued that perceived authenticity operates as a psychological filter, where stakeholders critically assess not only the presence of information, but also its sincerity and alignment with

institutional values. Thus, even when transparency mechanisms are in place, if stakeholders perceive the communication as insincere or manipulative, trust may not be established (Ortega-Rodríguez, Licerán-Gutiérrez, & Moreno-Albarracín, 2020).

In the context of crisis communication, authenticity becomes even more pivotal. Rim et al. (2024) found that during high-stress situations, stakeholders' skepticism increases, making them more sensitive to cues of sincerity and less forgiving of inconsistencies. Similarly, Lee (2023) emphasized that perceived authenticity is a dynamic construct, shaped by both message content and delivery tone. For HEIs, this implies that robotic, formalized statements may fail to build trust if they lack an empathetic and context-sensitive approach.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that perceived authenticity is context-dependent. For instance, while some stakeholders may prioritize factual accuracy, others may value emotional resonance and institutional accountability. In China's HEIs, where hierarchical governance and rigid communication protocols are prevalent, authenticity often emerges not merely from message content, but also from who delivers the message and how stakeholder concerns are addressed (Liu et al., 2021b). Therefore, fostering organizational trust requires a multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond superficial transparency.

In conclusion, the study confirms that perceived authenticity significantly influences organizational trust within HEIs during public opinion crises. However, the findings also suggest that authenticity must be demonstrated consistently through actions and empathetic engagement, rather than being treated as a one-time communication strategy. HEIs should therefore design their crisis communication strategies to not only deliver accurate information, but also to ensure authenticity is perceived across different stakeholder groups.

### **5.3.5 The Mediating Effect of Perceived Authenticity on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust**

This section addresses the third research question, which examines whether lecturers' 'perceived authenticity' mediates the relationship between 'information transparency' and 'organizational trust' during public opinion crises in China's HEIs. The corresponding hypothesis is as follows:

H4: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

The analysis results (refer to Table 4.7) demonstrate that information transparency exerts a significant positive effect on perceived authenticity, which in turn positively influences organizational trust. This confirms that perceived authenticity plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust. In other words, while transparency is essential, its ability to foster

trust largely depends on how stakeholders perceive the authenticity of the information provided.

This finding extends prior research that had highlighted the foundational role of authenticity in converting transparency into trust. Busser and Shulga (2019) emphasized that transparency serves as a prerequisite for authenticity, yet the subjective perception of authenticity determines whether transparency efforts are credible and impactful in building stakeholder trust. Similarly, Yang and Battocchio (2021) demonstrated that brand authenticity mediates the link between transparency and consumer trust, highlighting that transparency alone, without perceived genuineness, is insufficient to establish meaningful trust.

In the context of HEIs, this mediating mechanism is particularly relevant due to the asymmetry of information during crisis events. As noted by Albu and Flyverbom (2019), transparency efforts must be paired with sincere and contextually appropriate communication strategies to avoid perceptions of superficiality or strategic ambiguity. This suggests that lecturers' perception of authenticity becomes the 'lens' through which transparent information is evaluated and internalized into trust.

While previous studies have predominantly explored this mediating effect within marketing, CSR communication, and corporate branding contexts (Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Rim et al., 2024), limited empirical research has examined how perceived

authenticity functions as a mediator in public sector organizations, particularly in HEIs. This study addresses this gap by empirically validating that enhancing transparency efforts, when coupled with strategies that reinforce the authenticity of information, can substantially improve lecturers' organizational trust. Thus, it responds to recent calls for research focusing on internal stakeholder perceptions of transparency and authenticity within non-profit educational settings (Calonge et al., 2021; Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Moreover, from the lens of the Signaling Theory, transparent information dissemination serves as a signal of organizational reliability. However, this signal only translates into trust when stakeholders decode it as authentic and aligned with organizational values and actions (Suharyati et al., 2021). The mediating role of perceived authenticity revealed in this study emphasizes that transparency and authenticity are interdependent, rather than mutually exclusive constructs.

To sum up, these findings underline that HEIs should go beyond mere transparency initiatives by fostering perceived authenticity through genuine engagement, truthful disclosures, and responsive communication strategies. Without establishing perceived authenticity, transparency alone is unlikely to engender sustainable trust among internal stakeholders. This insight is crucial for institutional leaders aiming to bolster organizational trust during public opinion crises.

### **5.3.6 The Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Justice**

This section discusses the relationship between information transparency and organizational justice, with the proposed assumptions as follows:

H5: There is a significant relationship between information transparency and organizational justice during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

According to the results of the path coefficient analysis (refer to Table 4.8), a strong correlation was found between 'perceived authenticity' and 'organizational trust'.

These findings suggest that higher levels of information transparency contribute significantly to enhancing perceptions of organizational justice, highlighting the critical role of transparent communication in creating a fair organizational environment.

While Hofmann and Strobel (2020) previously established that transparency initiatives are linked to enhanced perceptions of justice, they also cautioned about potential negative repercussions, such as information overload and the resultant sense of ambiguity among employees. This study builds upon their findings by contextualizing transparency within the unique crisis dynamics of HEIs, where the stakes of information withholding are heightened due to public scrutiny and reputational risks.

Recent research further supports the positive link between information transparency and organizational justice. For instance, Suharyati et al. (2021) emphasized that transparent information-sharing practices cultivate perceptions of justice and accountability, which are pivotal in maintaining internal trust during organizational upheavals. Similarly, Gedrimiene et al. (2023) demonstrated that in non-profit organizations, transparency mechanisms act as a signaling device, reinforcing stakeholder perceptions of procedural justice and ethical conduct.

In the context of higher education, Calonge et al. (2021) noted that transparent governance practices directly contribute to enhanced perceptions of justice among faculty members, particularly in scenarios involving policy changes, crisis management, or resource allocation. These findings align with the current study's results, confirming that when lecturers perceive information disclosure as transparent, their evaluation of institutional justice becomes more favorable.

However, it is important to acknowledge that transparency alone is not a panacea for justice-related issues. As Albu and Flyverbom (2019) suggested, the effectiveness of transparency depends on the clarity, relevance, and timeliness of information shared. Overly complex or untimely disclosures may lead to confusion and perceived unfairness, negating the intended benefits of transparency efforts. Therefore, HEIs must ensure that their transparency strategies are not only comprehensive, but also

strategically curated to enhance stakeholders' sense of justice without overwhelming them.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with the Social Exchange Theory, which posits that individuals' perceptions of justice are influenced by the reciprocal flow of information and resources between themselves and the organization (Ahmad et al., 2023). Transparent communication serves as a form of social currency, reinforcing the psychological contract between lecturers and their institutions, thereby strengthening perceptions of justice.

In conclusion, the study confirms that information transparency significantly influences organizational justice perceptions among lecturers in HEIs during public opinion crises. Nonetheless, institutions must balance transparency efforts with considerations of information clarity, relevance, and stakeholder engagement to maximize the positive outcomes associated with justice perceptions.

### **5.3.7 The Relationship between Organizational Justice and Organizational Trust**

This section examines the relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust, with the proposed assumption as follows:

H6: There is a significant relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

The motivation for investigating this relationship stems from the critical role that perceptions of justice play in fostering trust within organizational settings. Organizational justice, encompassing procedural, distributive, and interactional justice, forms the foundation of employees' trust in institutional processes and leadership (Shao, Zhang, Li, & Zhang, 2022). Particularly in HEIs, where governance structures are often hierarchical and decision-making transparency is limited, understanding how justice perceptions influence trust is essential for effective crisis management.

The findings of this study indicate a significant positive relationship between organizational justice and organizational trust (refer to Table 4.9). However, the strength of this relationship is comparatively weaker than the impact of perceived authenticity. This suggests that while justice in decision-making and resource allocation is important, it may not be the foremost factor in cultivating trust during public opinion crises. In such situations, stakeholders prioritize transparency, authenticity, and timely communication over justice (Claeys & De Waele, 2022; Yang, Ruan, Li, & Zhang, 2025). Trust is more directly influenced by how honestly and clearly the organization responds to the crisis (Erickson, 2021). Thus, authentic and transparent communication plays a more critical role in maintaining organizational trust under crisis conditions than organizational justice alone.

This observation challenges the traditional view that justice is a primary antecedent of organizational trust. It aligns with recent findings by Solinas-Saunders et al. (2024)

who emphasized that in high-pressure scenarios, trust is more immediately shaped by timely and credible information than by perceived justice. Similarly, Mubashar et al. (2022) noted that while organizational justice remains a long-term trust-building factor, its immediate impact diminishes in crisis situations unless accompanied by transparent communication strategies.

Nonetheless, organizational justice cannot be overlooked. As argued by Al Shibly and Bakir (2022), justice in processes, outcomes, and interpersonal treatment cultivates a baseline level of trust, which acts as a buffer against the erosion of confidence during crises. Justice perceptions foster psychological safety and a sense of predictability, which are foundational for trust development (Chi et al., 2021; Snyman et al., 2023). In HEIs, when lecturers perceive that policies and decisions are made equitably and are treated with respect, their inclination to trust institutional leadership increases, even amidst crises.

Moreover, procedural justice has been identified as a key mechanism through which trust and participation are enhanced in academic institutions. Research by Shao et al. (2022) highlighted that justice and transparent procedures encourage lecturers' engagement and foster organizational commitment. This underscores the importance of embedding justice within institutional policies to cultivate sustainable trust relationships.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that organizational justice significantly contributes to the development of organizational trust. However, its influence is context dependent. During public opinion crises, the immediacy of transparent and authentic communication takes precedence, but justice remains a crucial underpinning for long-term trust and institutional stability. HEIs must therefore adopt a dual strategy by strengthening justice practices while simultaneously ensuring transparency and authenticity to effectively build and maintain trust among lecturers.

### **5.3.8 The Mediating Effect of Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust**

This section discusses the findings of the fourth research question: Does organizational justice mediate the relationship between information transparency on organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs? The hypothesis formulated for this purpose is as follows:

H7: Organizational justice mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust during public opinion crises in China's HEIs.

The results of this study reveal that organizational justice serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust (refer to Table 4.10). This finding suggests that while transparency has a direct effect on trust, its influence is further amplified when stakeholders perceive decision-making processes as fair and equitable. However, the mediating effect size of organizational

justice is relatively weaker compared to perceived authenticity, indicating that during crisis situations, stakeholders may prioritize the accuracy and credibility of information (authenticity) over formal justice procedures.

This observation aligns with Dahiya (2023) who emphasized that organizational justice significantly influences trust formation, especially in turbulent organizational contexts. However, Dahiya (2023) also noted that in high-pressure environments, transparency initiatives must be accompanied by genuine efforts to uphold justice, or else the impact on trust may be minimal.

Additionally, Solinas-Saunders et al. (2024) argued that interactional justice, which pertains to respectful and honest communication, plays a pivotal role in shaping employee trust in management, often surpassing distributive justice in importance during crisis situations. This underscores the necessity for HEIs to focus not only on transparent information disclosure, but also on fostering fair interpersonal interactions to reinforce trust.

Further, Chi et al. (2021) found that in China's HEIs, perceptions of organizational justice significantly enhance trust, yet the dynamic becomes more complex during crisis periods where the immediacy and credibility of information take precedence. Similarly, Mubashar et al. (2022) highlighted that while justice is essential for long-

term trust cultivation, their mediating influence can be overshadowed by real-time transparency and authenticity in acute crisis scenarios.

Drawing on the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), this study corroborates the notion that fair treatment, as perceived through transparent practices, fosters reciprocal trust among stakeholders. Information transparency enhances the perception of organizational justice by providing lecturers with insights into fair processes, thus promoting trust. Nevertheless, this process is highly context-dependent given that, during crises, the significance of justice as a mediating factor becomes less prominent due to stakeholders' heightened demand for accurate, credible, and timely information.

In summary, while organizational justice plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust, its impact is conditional on contextual factors such as crisis intensity and stakeholder expectations. HEIs should thus adopt an integrated communication approach that balances transparency, justice, and authenticity to effectively strengthen trust in crisis situations.

## **5.4 Implications**

The research makes a twofold contribution, encompassing both theoretical and practical implication.

### **5.4.1 Theoretical Implication**

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the organizational trust literature by empirically validating the direct relationship between information transparency and organizational trust within the context of HEIs. While previous research has extensively explored organizational trust in for-profit sectors (Gedrimiene et al., 2023; Lee & Li, 2021; Rim et al., 2024; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022), limited empirical evidence exists regarding the effect of transparency mechanisms on trust in non-profit settings, particularly within HEIs during public opinion crises (Dehghani Soltani, Mesbahi, & Darvish, 2021; Niedlich et al., 2021). The complex relationship between information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice in fostering trust within academic institutions has not been sufficiently examined, especially in crisis scenarios where reputational stakes are high (Othman, Karim, & Wasman, 2025; Schnackenberg et al., 2021).

Addressing this gap, the study investigates how transparency efforts, when intertwined with stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity and justice, collectively shape trust-building processes within HEIs during public opinion crises. By empirically validating the direct and mediated effects of transparency, this study addresses this theoretical void, providing a more holistic view of how these constructs interact within the governance structures of HEIs.

Specifically, the study extends the application of the Signaling Theory by conceptualizing HEIs as signal senders who employ transparent communication

strategies defined by disclosure, clarity, and accuracy to mitigate information asymmetry and build credibility with internal stakeholders (Porumbescu et al., 2022). While previous applications of the Signaling Theory had focused on market-driven contexts (Boyd, Sese, & Tillmanns, 2023; Shahid, Tariq, Paul, Naqvi, & Hallo, 2024), this research adapts the theory to the non-market domain of higher education, where the signaling process is influenced by organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and crisis intensity (Schnackenberg et al., 2021). The findings underscore that the effectiveness of transparency signals is contingent not only on their clarity but also on the authenticity perceived by the recipients, which is critical in crisis communication contexts.



Additionally, the research enriches the Social Exchange Theory by illustrating how perceptions of organizational justice mediate the relationship between transparency and trust. Prior studies had established that justice in procedures and interactions fosters reciprocal trust behaviors (Chi et al., 2021; Solinas-Saunders et al., 2024). Within HEIs, lecturers' trust develops through cognitive assessments of how transparently and fairly information is conveyed, which then shapes their behavioral responses towards the institution (He & Chi, 2021; Mubashar et al., 2022). Open and ethical communication further bridges information gaps and strengthens trust-based exchanges between institutions and lecturers (Cole et al., 2021; Yu & Chen, 2023).

Furthermore, this study proposes an integrated conceptual model where perceived authenticity and organizational justice function as key mediators, connecting information transparency with organizational trust. This integrative approach advances beyond linear causality models by recognizing the psychological and relational mechanisms through which transparency initiatives foster trust outcomes (Lee, 2023; Gedrimiene et al., 2023).

By clarifying the conceptual boundaries between transparency, authenticity, and justice, this study advances the theoretical framework of organizational trust within HEIs, a domain often overlooked in mainstream trust research (Niedlich et al., 2021; Rim et al., 2024). This contribution lays the foundation for developing context-sensitive models that better capture the dynamics of trust-building in academic institutions.

#### **5.4.2 Practical Implication**

From a practical standpoint, this study underscores the pivotal role of information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice in shaping lecturers' organizational trust during public opinion crises in HEIs. Traditionally, many HEIs adopt a "silence strategy" or selectively disclose information to avoid escalating reputational risks. However, such approaches often lead to internal stakeholder alienation, rumor proliferation, and erosion of organizational trust (Harriott, 2025; Romano, 2024).

This research identifies a critical policy gap within HEIs' crisis management frameworks: the absence of structured internal communication protocols tailored for public opinion crises. The findings suggest that transparent and authentic communication is not merely a public relations tool, but also a strategic necessity for sustaining trust among lecturers who are the key internal stakeholders and opinion leaders within academic environments.

To address this gap, HEIs need to establish formal crisis communication policies that mandate proactive information disclosure to lecturers during crises. These policies should emphasize not only the accuracy and timeliness of the information, but also the justice and consistency of communication practices (Downes, 2023). Beyond basic information sharing, institutions should design communication strategies that enhance lecturers' perceptions of justice, thereby fostering trust recovery and organizational solidarity.

Additionally, it is recommended that HEIs create dedicated Crisis Communication departments or cross-functional crisis response teams. These departments should be equipped with clear operational guidelines, real-time information verification systems, and feedback mechanisms that ensure transparent and credible communication with internal stakeholders (Jiang et al., 2025).

Moreover, HEIs should cultivate a culture of proactive transparency, integrating open and fair communication into their daily management practices. Building such a culture will enhance lecturers' long-term trust and resilience toward the institution's crisis responses. As highlighted by Gedrimiene et al. (2023), trust is not only established during crisis events, but is also the result of consistent, transparent, and just interactions over time.

Given that accuracy emerged as the most influential aspect of transparency in this study, HEIs must prioritize accuracy enhancement measures. These may include regular communication audits, stakeholder feedback loops, and the appointment of information accuracy officers responsible for overseeing content quality in public disclosures (Lazic, Đorđević, & Gazizulina, 2021; Shukla, 2023).

Furthermore, this study suggests that HEIs should institutionalize justice assessment mechanisms such as post-crisis trust evaluations or stakeholder justice perception surveys. These measures would ensure that communication efforts are perceived as fair and facilitate continuous improvement in trust-building strategies (Solinas-Saunders et al., 2024; Yue et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the study advocates for a transition from reactive crisis responses to a comprehensive, policy-driven crisis management framework. This framework should integrate transparency, authenticity, and justice as foundational principles in

organizational governance. Such a systematic approach will not only mitigate reputational damage during crises, but will also reinforce the long-term credibility and internal cohesion of HEIs.

Although this study focuses on HEIs in Jiangxi Province, its findings are applicable to HEIs across China. Given the shared challenges faced by HEIs in managing public opinion crises in the digital age, the recommendations derived from this study offer valuable insights for HEI administrators nationwide.

### **5.5 Limitations of the Study**

While this study offers valuable insights into how information transparency, perceived authenticity, and organizational justice influence lecturers' organizational trust in HEIs during public opinion crises, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings and provide direction for future research.

First, the geographical and sample limitations restrict the generalizability of the findings. The research focused exclusively on public HEIs in Jiangxi Province, which, due to cultural, administrative, and socio-economic factors, may not fully represent the dynamics present in other regions of China or in HEIs globally. As highlighted by Kaasa and Andriani (2022) and Lo (2025), regional disparities in governance practices and institutional cultures can significantly affect stakeholder perceptions of

transparency and trust. Thus, future studies should consider adopting a multi-regional or national sampling strategy to enhance the external validity of the results.

Second, the conceptual model adopted in this study, while comprehensive in linking information transparency with organizational trust via perceived authenticity and organizational justice, remains limited in scope. Other critical factors that influence trust-building during crises, such as leadership credibility (Lee & Li, 2021), stakeholder engagement strategies (Iandolo, La Sala, Turriziani, & Caputo, 2024), and crisis communication competence (Jiang et al, 2025), should be integrated in future studies to develop a more nuanced, context-sensitive model of organizational trust dynamics.



Third, the cross-sectional design employed in this study inherently limits causal inferences. As the data were collected at a single point in time, it is challenging to ascertain how perceptions of transparency, authenticity, and justice evolve throughout different phases of a crisis. Longitudinal studies are necessary to capture the dynamic and temporal aspects of trust formation and erosion. According to Rim et al. (2024), trust-building is not a static event but rather a continuous process that requires sustained efforts and adaptive communication strategies, particularly during prolonged or recurrent public opinion crises.

Lastly, this research relied solely on self-reported data, which may introduce response biases such as social desirability or perceptual distortion. The inclusion of multi-source data, including managerial perspectives and objective institutional data, could provide a more holistic and balanced view of trust dynamics within HEIs.

In summary, addressing these limitations through expanded geographical scope, enriched conceptual modeling, longitudinal designs, and diversified data sources will contribute to a deeper and more generalizable understanding of how information transparency and related constructs influence organizational trust in higher education contexts.

## **5.6 Recommendations for Further Research**

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations for future research are proposed to enhance the depth and applicability of scholarly inquiry in the field of organizational trust within HEIs during public opinion crises.

First, this research focused on five public HEIs in Jiangxi Province, which limits generalizability. Future studies should expand the scope to different regions in China, considering variations in institutional culture, governance, and public opinion environments, to examine how these factors influence transparency and trust dynamics.

Second, comparative studies between public and private HEIs are needed. Governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and stakeholder expectations differ significantly between these sectors, which may lead to distinct perceptions of transparency, authenticity, and justice (Iqbal, Mustafa, & Naz, 2023). Such comparisons would provide a more comprehensive understanding of trust formation across institutional types.

Third, future research should integrate other critical factors into the model, such as leadership credibility, stakeholder engagement, and crisis communication. These variables could refine the understanding of how transparency influences trust under different crisis conditions.

Fourth, qualitative or mixed-method approaches are recommended to capture lecturers' deeper cognitive and emotional responses. Interviews, focus groups, or case studies can reveal nuanced insights that surveys may overlook, enhancing the explanatory power of research findings.

Lastly, longitudinal studies are necessary to observe how trust evolves over time during crises. Tracking changes across different crisis stages will offer more dynamic and practical insights for HEIs in managing trust.

By addressing these aspects, future research can provide more robust theoretical contributions and practical strategies for HEI administrators to manage organizational trust effectively.

### **5.7 Conclusion of Study**

This study explored the role of 'perceived authenticity' and 'organizational justice' as mediating factors in understanding how 'information transparency' affects 'organizational trust'. Based on the results and discussion, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, in the context of public opinion crises within HEIs in Jiangxi Province, China, lecturers' perceptions of information transparency, organizational justice, and organizational trust were found to be at moderate levels. Second, the research confirmed a significant positive relationship between information transparency, encompassing elements such as disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, and organizational trust. Among them, information accuracy has the greatest impact on organizational trust. Third, information transparency was also found to have a significant positive relationship with perceived authenticity. Fourth, the relationship between perceived authenticity and organizational trust were also found to be positively and significantly related. Fifth, perceived authenticity successfully mediates the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust. Sixth, the study demonstrated that information transparency significantly and positively impacts organizational justice. Seventh, a significant positive relationship was found between organizational justice and organizational trust. Lastly, organizational justice was found to play a positive

mediating role in the relationship between information transparency and organizational trust.

The aforementioned results offer valuable insights into the role of lecturers' perceived information transparency, authenticity and organizational justice in determining organizational trust in the crisis of public opinion among HEI administrators. The findings of this study may inspire future researchers to conduct studies involving these variables in other contexts. As mentioned earlier, the limited research on internal stakeholders within the context of China's HEIs opens up new opportunities for future studies, offering a promising and rewarding avenue for further exploration.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Research Questionnaire

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am conducting a survey of “Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Justice on the Relationship of Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in Jiangxi, China”. This survey is a part of my PhD in Communication at Universiti Utara Malaysia.

The information provided by you will only be used for Academic Purpose ONLY and will be kept completely confidential. Your response will be greatly appreciated and will assist me in ensuring my research.

Thank you for your participant.

Yours sincerely

Xia Meng

PhD candidate

Universiti Utara Malaysia

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**Section B: Organizational Trust**

**Instruction:** The following items are related to organizational trust. Please read the following statements and tick the most appropriate ones from 1 to 5 to reflect your opinion on each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Organizational Trust		1	2	3	4	5
1	I'm willing to let my organization make decisions for me.					
2	I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of me.					
3	I trust the organization to take care of academic staff.					
4	I feel very confident about my organization.					
5	This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.					
6	This organization is known to be successful at the things it tries to do.					
7	The organization treats academic staff fairly and justly.					
8	The organization can be relied on to keep its promises.					
9	Sound principles seem to guide the behaviour of this organization.					
10	This organization does not mislead academic staff.					
11	Whenever this organization makes a decision, I know it will be concerned about academic staff.					
12	I believe this organization takes the opinions of academic staff into account when making decisions.					
13	This organization is interested in the well-being of academic staff, not just itself.					

### Section C: Information Transparency

**Instruction:** The following items are related to information transparency. Please read the following statements and tick the most appropriate ones from 1 to 5 to reflect your opinion on each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Transparency		1	2	3	4	5
Disclosure 1	The information I receive from my organization fully encompasses what I want to know about.					
Disclosure 2	The information I receive from my organization covers all the topics I want to know about.					
Disclosure 3	I have all the information I need from organization.					
Disclosure 4	A sufficient amount of information is presented by organization.					
Clarity 1	The information presented by organization is understandable.					
Clarity 2	The information from organization is clear.					
Clarity 3	The information from organization is comprehensible.					
Clarity 4	The information from organization is presented in a language I understand.					
Accuracy 1	The information from organization appears to be true.					
Accuracy 2	The information from organization appears correct.					
Accuracy 3	The information from organization appears accurate.					
Accuracy 4	The information from organization appears right.					

#### Section D: Perceived Authenticity

**Instruction:** The following items are related to perceived authenticity. Please read the following statements and tick the most appropriate ones from 1 to 5 to reflect your opinion on each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Perceived Authenticity		1	2	3	4	5
1	This organization always tells the truth.					
2	I believe that this organization's actions are genuine.					
3	I feel that this organization is willing to admit to mistakes when they are made.					
4	I feel that this organization accepts and learns from mistakes.					
5	I believe that this organization's behaviour matches its core values.					
6	The organization's beliefs and actions are consistent.					
7	I think this organization matches the rhetoric with its action.					

#### Section E: Organizational Justice

**Instruction:** The following items are related to organizational justice. Please read the following statements and tick the most appropriate ones from 1 to 5 to reflect your opinion on each statement.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

<b>Organizational Justice</b>		1	2	3	4	5
1	I am able to express my views and feelings during the procedures of managing crisis.					
2	I have had an influence on the outcome of the crisis management procedures.					
3	The crisis management procedures were applied consistently.					
4	The crisis management procedures were free of bias.					
5	The crisis management procedures were based on accurate information.					
6	I am able to appeal the outcome of these crisis management procedures.					
7	The crisis management procedures upheld ethical and moral standards.					
8	I am being treated with politeness by leaders.					
9	I am being treated with dignity by leaders.					
10	I am being treated with respect by leaders.					
11	The leaders refrained from making improper remarks or comments.					
12	I received the truth and honest communication from the leaders.					
13	The leaders thoroughly explained the procedures for managing a public opinion crisis.					
14	The leaders' explanation of the crisis management procedures is reasonable.					
15	The leaders communicated details in a timely manner.					
16	The leaders tailored their communication to meet the specific needs of individuals.					

Thank you for your participation and your time to answer the survey. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence and used for academic purposes only.

## Appendix B: Instrument Validation Form

### Instrument Validation Form

Name of Validator : Leng Jingwei  
 Degree : PhD  
 Position : Associate Professor  
 No. of Years in Teaching : 10 years

**Title: Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in Jiangxi, China**

**Instruction:** Please indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement on the statements provided below by encircling the number which corresponds to your best to your judgment.

1 - Strongly Disagree    2 - Disagree    3 - Undecided    4 - Agree    5 - Strongly Agree

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
1. Clarity and Directions of Items The vocabulary level, language, structure and conceptual level of participants. The test directions and the items are within in a clear and understandable manner.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Presentation and Organization of Items The items are presented and organized in logical manner	1	2	3	4	5
3. Suitability of Items The item appropriately presented the substance of the research. The questions are designed to determine the skills that are supposed to be measured	1	2	3	4	5
4. Adequateness of the Content The number of the questions per area is a representative enough of all the questions needed for the research.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Attainment of Purpose The instrument as a whole fulfils the objectives needed for the research	1	2	3	4	5
6. Objective Each item question requires only one specific answer or measures only one behaviour and no aspect of the questionnaires suggests in the past of the researcher.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Scale and Evaluation Rating The scale adapted is appropriate for the item.	1	2	3	4	5

**Comments and Suggestions:**

The instrument demonstrates conceptual alignment with the intended constructs and is grounded in literature. The items are generally well-formulated, and the use of a five-point Likert scale is appropriate for the target respondents.

*Leng Jingwei*

Signature over Printed Name

## Instrument Validation Form

Name of Validator : Li Ya  
 Degree : PhD  
 Position : Associate Professor  
 No. of Years in Teaching : 15 years

**Title: Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in Jiangxi, China**

**Instruction:** Please indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement on the statements provided below by encircling the number which corresponds to your best to your judgment.

1 - Strongly Disagree    2 - Disagree    3 - Undecided    4 - Agree    5 - Strongly Agree

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
1. Clarity and Directions of Items The vocabulary level, language, structure and conceptual level of participants. The test directions and the items are within in a clear and understandable manner.	1	2	3	(4)	5
2. Presentation and Organization of Items The items are presented and organized in logical manner	1	2	3	(4)	5
3. Suitability of Items The item appropriately presented the substance of the research. The questions are designed to determine the skills that are supposed to be measured	1	2	3	4	(5)
4. Adequateness of the Content The number of the questions per area is a representative enough of all the questions needed for the research.	1	2	3	4	(5)
5. Attainment of Purpose The instrument as a whole fulfils the objectives needed for the research	1	2	3	4	(5)
6. Objective Each item question requires only one specific answer or measures only one behaviour and no aspect of the questionnaires suggests in the past of the researcher.	1	2	3	4	(5)
7. Scale and Evaluation Rating The scale adapted is appropriate for the item.	1	2	3	4	(5)

**Comments and Suggestions:**

The instrument demonstrates conceptual alignment with the intended constructs and is grounded in literature. The items are generally well-formulated, and the use of a five-point Likert scale is appropriate for the target respondents.

*Li Ya*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature over Printed Name

## Appendix C: Certificate of Translation

### Certificate of Translation

I, Yu Yanjin, certify that I am competent to translate between English and Chinese. I further certify that I translated the above document titled Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in Jiangxi, China, and the translation is true and accurate to the best of my abilities.

Signature:



**UUM**  
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Position: Associate Professor

Email: 704374261@qq.com

## Certificate of Translation

I, Li Ting, certify that I am competent to translate between English and Chinese. I further certify that I translated the above document titled Mediation Effects of Perceived Authenticity and Organizational Justice on the Relationship between Information Transparency and Organizational Trust in Jiangxi, China, and the translation is true and accurate to the best of my abilities.

Signature:



Li Ting

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