

# DOES PARTICIPATION HAVE AN IMPACT ON TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST? A LOCAL GOVERNMENT CASE

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## Abstract

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The impact of transparency and participation on trust has been addressed in various studies. It is generally accepted that citizens' trust in governments and public administrations increases when transparency and participation increase (Kiss et al., 2022). Unlike the others, this study aims to reveal the mediating effect of participation in the relationship between transparency and trust at the local government level. For this purpose, the data collected from citizens in the Uşak province of Turkey were analyzed using structural equation modeling. First, as in many studies, the results reveal a positive and statistically significant effect of transparency and participation on trust. When the results regarding the mediating effect of participation, which constitutes the focus of the study, are examined, it is seen that this effect is partially realized. In other words, in our sample, participation, to some extent, increases citizens' perception of transparency, which contributes positively to citizens' trust in local government units. The low mediation effect in our study can be attributed primarily to the current democratic and political-cultural structure and the inability to operate democratic governance and active citizenship mechanisms properly.

**Keywords:** Trust, Transparency, Participation, Local Governments, Mediating Effect

**Authors' individual contribution:** Conceptualization — Ş.E. and Y.U.U.; Methodology — Ş.E. and Y.U.U.; Formal Analysis — Y.U.U.; Investigation — Y.U.U.; Data Curation — Ş.E. and Y.U.U.; Writing — Original Draft — Ş.E. and Y.U.U.; Writing — Review & Editing — Ş.E.; Visualization — Ş.E. and Y.U.U.; Supervision — Ş.E.; Project Administration — Ş.E.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public administration, the crucial link between citizens and the state, is where trust either thrives or fades, depending on the quality of service and treatment (Peters & Pierre, 2018). In today's world, many governments and public administrations are grappling with the challenge of declining trust, recognizing it as a top priority (Schmidhuber et al., 2020; Song & Lee, 2016). Trust not only fosters democratic values but also enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations and social groups (Carnevale & Wechsler, 1992). This underscores

the intricate connection between trust, performance, and legitimacy (Askvik et al., 2010). Moreover, trust's influence extends to a wide range of issues, including individual well-being, social cohesion, economic development, and political and administrative sustainability (Barbalet, 1996; Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Jameel et al., 2019).

Citizens' distrust of government and public administrations has been one of the main justifications for numerous public administration reforms (Schmidhuber et al., 2020). These reforms have centered around the principles of transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, efficiency, accountability,

responsiveness, and participation, particularly within the framework of the government-to-governance approach (Aulich, 2009; Bourgon, 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2009). Transparency has been the first principle and instrument most associated with trust (Halachmi & Greiling, 2013; Kosack & Fung, 2014). It is recognized that transparency enables responsiveness and accountability, increasing citizens' trust in government and public administrations. It is also stated that transparency is the most crucial element of governance as a democratic value (Gabriel et al., 2019; Hale, 2008; Jun et al., 2014).

Participation is another governance principle and tool that ensures trust in government and public administrations (Cendón, 2000; Yang & Pandey, 2011). It is stated that participation strengthens the ties between citizens and governments within the framework of the principles of accessibility and responsiveness (Haustein & Lorson, 2023). In addition, it is argued that the collaborations, partnerships, and dialogue provided by participation in administrative processes create responsibilities for both parties and that mutual trust is the basis of this collective responsibility (Aulich, 2009; Blakeley, 2010).

This study aims to determine the effect of transparency and participation on trust and to identify the mediating role of participation in the impact of transparency on trust. In the literature, there are studies on the relationships between transparency and trust (Halachmi & Greiling, 2013; Kraah & Mertens, 2023), participation and trust (Schmidhuber et al., 2020; Šaparnienė et al., 2021), e-government practices, participation, transparency and trust (Arkorful et al., 2021; Jameel et al., 2019; Kim & Lee, 2012; Song & Lee, 2016; Wang et al., 2020). These studies generally focus on reciprocal relationships and effects. What distinguishes our study from the others is that we try to reveal the mediating impact of participation at the local government level on the relationship between transparency and trust. In this context, our study is thought to contribute to the literature.

This study is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the conceptual framework, theoretical discussion, and hypotheses. Section 3 presents the research methodology, including the research model, sampling techniques, data collection tools, and analysis methods. Section 4 reviews the results and hypothesis testing. Section 5 discusses the findings obtained. Finally, Section 6 provides the study's conclusion, limitations, and future study predictions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1. Trust

Trust is one of the most important determinants of individual and social behavior (Fulmer, 2018). It is a force of social integration. It is recognized as the first unifying element in situations where communication, interaction, and negotiation are present (Lewis & Weigert, 2012). In this context, it is one of the leading indicators and criteria of how efficient collaborations are (Höglund et al., 2019). Trust is also one of the most critical emotions necessary for organizational social processes (Barbalet, 1996). In contemporary societies, trust in the state and its institutions is considered

an essential element (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2009), and it is argued that the strength of democratic governments derives from public trust and confidence (Gabriel et al., 2019).

Trust is a concept that has been the subject of study in various and different fields. Therefore, there is no consensus on its definition (Bouckaert et al., 2002; Höglund et al., 2019). Fulmer (2018) discusses trust in terms of level of analysis. Accordingly, at the individual level, trust refers to the psychological state of an individual's willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations. In contrast, at higher levels of analysis, "trust is a psychological state shared among unit members who are willing to be vulnerable based on consensus or positive expectations". According to van Knippenberg (2018), trust is "a willingness to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations about another's behaviour" (p. 3). Different definitions of trust exist in politics and administration. Trust takes different forms, such as citizens' belief that public institutions will act in the interests of the community and its constituents (Kim & Lee, 2012); the ability to juxtapose democracy and bureaucracy and put them into practice (Vigoda-Gadot & Yuval, 2003); or at the local level local people's expectations of local institutions to fulfill their legal duties as development agents (Arkorful et al., 2021).

Lewis and Weigert (1985) state that trust has three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, and they complement each other. The cognitive dimension is based on knowledge and refers to a choice of whom we can trust, when, and under what conditions. The affective dimension forms the sociological basis of trust and is based on the cognitive dimension. Emotional bonds are essential in this dimension. When the first two dimensions are completed, the behavioral dimension of trust is realized. The behavioral context of trust is undertaking a risky course of action with a confident expectation that all persons involved will act competently and dutifully. As a result, trust emerges as a condition that allows individuals to realize satisfying human relationships (Carnevale & Wechsler, 1992).

Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017) found a consensus on two essential elements in studies on trust. The first of these is risk, and the second is interdependence. The attitude of trust in an individual is formed together with risk and expectations. Trusting always poses a risk for the trustor (Bouckaert et al., 2002). Nyhan (2000) states that trust has an overlapping structure consisting of justice, confidence, and risk-taking. Luhmann (1988) highlights the critical difference between trust and confidence. The individual's perceptions and attributions determine the main difference between the two concepts. In trust, the individual anticipates the risk and acts by accepting the positive and negative consequences. In confidence, on the other hand, the individual believes that many previously known conditions will remain constant. In other words, confidence refers to a state of certainty or clarity. Therefore, while confidence is the emotional basis of action and activity, trust is the emotional basis of cooperation (Barbalet, 1996). According to Hardin (2000), the trust relationship between individuals is more intense and reciprocal than the trust relationship between government and citizens. Therefore, it is more accurate to talk about confidence in the government rather than trust in it.

The degree of citizen trust has many positive or negative consequences for governments and public administrations (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, trust in government and public administrations is indispensable in democratic political and social systems (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017; Vigoda-Gadot & Yuval, 2003). Trust is a fundamental cornerstone of legitimacy (Jameel et al., 2019), playing a pivotal role in shaping citizens' support for public institutions (Hardin, 2000). Moreover, citizens' trust in public administration is critical for assessing the efficacy of public services and government bureaucracies (van de Walle & Migchelbrink, 2022). At the core of governance lies citizens' trust in government and public administrations (Vigoda-Gadot & Yuval, 2003). It is widely assumed that as trust in public institutions and the governance process increases, so does the strength of the relationship between the state and society (Askvik et al., 2010).

## **2.2. Transparency**

Transparency is recognized as one of the essential values of contemporary public administration and as one of the main tools of effective governance (Halachmi & Greiling, 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). In this context, two broad approaches complement each other. First, transparency is recognized as a democratic value. This understanding is a product of the transition from government to governance that developed rapidly after the 1980s. Second, transparency is seen as a policy tool. Governments facilitate decision-making by providing information to citizens in various areas (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2009).

Discussing a single understanding of transparency is impossible as it has many applications. It has multiple meanings, justifications, purposes, and applications (Kosack & Fung, 2014). For public institutions, transparency makes their behavior and objectives easily known to interested parties. This includes both access to information and public disclosure (Hale, 2008). In the context of public policy, transparency means that "information about the policy is available, where accountability is clear, and where citizens know what role they play in the implementation of the policy" (Finkelstein, 2000, p. 1). At the national or local government level, transparency refers to clarity in commitments and the ability to fulfill responsibilities (Arkorful et al., 2021).

Mitchell (2011) divides transparency into "transparency of governance" and "transparency for governance". Transparency of governance refers to the ability to observe the actions of actors who exercise the authority to govern society and to obtain information about these actions. Transparency for governance refers to the ability to obtain and disseminate information necessary to influence the behavior of specific actors. In line with this distinction, he divides transparency policies into disclosure and education-based transparency. Both involve attempts to disseminate information to influence the behavior of target audiences or actors. However, in disclosure-based transparency, the target audience or actor is not the recipient of information. In this context, it is a product of transparency for governance. In education-based transparency, the targeted audience or actor also receives information. Therefore, education-based transparency constitutes a form of governance transparency.

Heald (2006a) describes four types of transparency, considering the direction transparency can take. The first is upward transparency. This type of transparency is the ability of the superior to observe the behavior of the subordinate and the subordinate to observe the behavior of the agent within the framework of hierarchical or principal/agent relationships. The second type is bottom-up transparency, where the governed can observe the behavior of the governed. The third is outward transparency, where those inside the organization can observe the outside. Finally, it is possible to talk about inward transparency. Here, outsiders can observe what is happening inside the organization. Inward transparency is related to freedom of information and various mechanisms of social control.

Transparency is, first and foremost, about access to information (Mitchell, 2011). For this reason, early transparency policies emerged in the form of freedom of information and the right to information (Kosack & Fung, 2014). The aim has been to reduce certain risks that may arise for the public administration and citizens and to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public service (Fung et al., 2007). However, especially the innovations and opportunities brought by the information age and society have transformed transparency into a tool of democratic governance where interested parties can gather and negotiate not only their information but also their preferences, opinions, and demands (Fung et al., 2007).

Although considered indispensable, the degree and contribution of transparency in public administration is controversial (Fung et al., 2007; Heald, 2006b; Kosack & Fung, 2014). For example, Bovens (2009) argues that there is no absolute relationship between transparency and legitimacy and that excessive transparency practices can lead to inefficient and ineffective decisions and even undermine accountability, thereby reducing the legitimacy of governance. In this context, Heald (2006b) argues that transparency should be valued instrumentally and balanced with principles and values such as effectiveness, accountability, autonomy and control, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, fairness, legitimacy, and trust. With such an approach, transparency can be expected to contribute positively to trust by enhancing the credibility of public administrations.

## **2.3. Participation**

Participation has a long history in public administration theory. It has always been on the agenda as a tool for developing and improving democratic processes (Burke, 1968; Holum, 2023). For this reason, governance is considered together with various concepts such as transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and citizenship (Fung, 2015; Peters & Pierre, 2018). According to Burke (1968), participation is the ultimate voice of the citizen in the decision-making process of society. Arnstein (1969) sees participation as a "redistribution of power". Participation has also been described as "a way of life, a civic culture in which people participate creatively in public life" (Cuthill & Fien, 2005, p. 65) or "partnership between state actors and citizens" at varying levels (Dean, 2018, p. 180). In a more specific context, participation is

the involvement of individuals or communities in planning, designing, implementing and maintaining policies and projects (Kiss et al., 2022).

With the shift from government to governance, participation has also received considerable attention (Aulich, 2009). The need for social acceptance and support for the operations and actions of public administrations, on the one hand, and the need to realize the demands and aspirations of society and social groups, on the other hand, have been instrumental in initiating a robust participation process (Cendón, 2000). However, the first-period participation approach was shaped from the top down within the steering state approach shaped by neoliberal policies. This approach embraced the participation of the rational and responsible individual in public service delivery rather than citizen empowerment (Blakeley, 2010). Along with the developments in the governance approach, the participation approach has also expanded in size and scope (Fung, 2015).

The contemporary governance approach emphasizes participation in terms of the role of citizens in achieving public goals alongside vertical hierarchical decision-making structures (Young & Tanner, 2022). This approach adopts a wide range of participation approaches, from direct participation in priority setting and planning to deliberative processes in which citizens discuss alternatives (Cornwall, 2002). Citizens are expected to assume a more active role in the public sphere by leaving their traditional passive role (Aulich, 2009). In this context, the theory and practice of local governance have recently become more collaborative and participatory (Dean, 2018). It is argued that participation at the local level can create a solid local democracy by developing human and social capital (Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Ghose, 2005).

There are serious criticisms of the optimistic view of participation. Foremost among these is how citizenship is defined. At this point, the place of disadvantaged groups and ethnic and political communities within the concept of citizenship needs to be clarified. Another issue that also involves the definition of citizenship is the degree of participation. It is accepted that many factors, such as the political system, traditions, culture, education and knowledge, technology, and public administrators' attitudes, directly impact participation. All these factors also determine the type and strength of participation. This is because it is often argued that participation activities are tokenistic (Arnstein, 1969; Ghose, 2005; Kiss et al., 2022; Yang & Pandey, 2011; Young & Tanner, 2022).

#### 2.4. Theoretical discussion and hypotheses development

Citizens expect the government, and therefore the public administration, to be honest and responsible. In other words, they expect them to comply with democratic principles, ensure the rule of law, act in the public interest, be fair in their decisions, and be accountable while fulfilling their duties. In this context, trust is considered both a precondition and a consequence of the actions of governments and public administrations (Bourgon, 2007). For this reason, mistrust is considered one of the leading causes of government failures and, hence, changes in democratic systems (Bouckaert et al., 2002; Schmidhuber et al., 2020).

Transparency is one of the leading solutions to growing mistrust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Transparency is seen, first and foremost, as a prerequisite for accountability (Gabriel et al., 2019). It plays a vital role in building governance capacity and establishing good governance due to its positive role in reducing corruption and increasing efficiency and effectiveness (Jun et al., 2014). It is also recognized as providing a balance of power between those who govern and those who are governed (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). For all these reasons, transparency is argued to be an essential democratic value for credible governments and public administrations (Schmidhuber et al., 2020).

While it is accepted that there is a relationship between transparency and trust, the level and impact of this relationship are highly controversial (Ripamonti, 2024). For example, Song and Lee (2016) found that transparency created through various social media tools increases trust in the government. Krah and Mertens (2023) state that financial transparency in local governments positively affects citizens' trust. Beshi and Kaur (2020) found the positive effect of perceived transparency practices on public trust in local government. Similarly, Hartanto et al. (2021) state that transparency positively and significantly affects public trust in local government. According to Halachmi and Greiling (2013), transparency positively affects trust, but excessive transparency practices may have harmful consequences. According to Grimmelikhuijsen (2009), the effect of transparency on trust is relatively low and insufficient to increase public trust on its own. Again, Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013) found that the role of transparency in increasing trust is relatively low and that this effect varies according to cultural differences. In this study, in line with our purpose, our first hypothesis is formed as follows:

*H1: Transparency positively and statistically significantly affects trust.*

Another solution to the trust problem is participation (Dean, 2018; Luhmann, 1988; Young & Tanner, 2022). Citizens' participation in governance, first and foremost, increases the legitimacy of the decisions taken by the rulers (Fung, 2015). Participation is also argued to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of public services and make governments more accountable (Rosilawati et al., 2021). Public participation is a prerequisite in democratic systems (Jameel et al., 2019). In this context, Denhardt (2002) argues that democratic structures can exist through governance mechanisms based on dialogue and negotiation, where citizens take responsibility and actively participate. However, just like transparency, participation is also controversial. This is because especially tokenistic participation practices lead to distrust, apathy, and avoidance of cooperation rather than increasing trust (Kiss et al., 2022; Yang & Pandey, 2011).

In research on the relationship between participation and trust, it is generally possible to see the positive effect of participation on trust. Schmidhuber et al. (2020) found that respondents who are satisfied with the opportunities for political participation have more trust in the government. In other words, the "feeling of having a say" increases trust in the public sector. Šaparnienė et al. (2021) found a circular relationship between trust and participation, i.e., increased trust leads to increased participation, and increased participation leads to more trust. Wang et al. (2020) find that

participatory use of government practices has a substantial impact on citizens' perceptions of trust and government reputation. A similar result is seen in Yang and Pandey (2011). They argue that using different and diverse participation mechanisms leads to better participation outcomes, which can increase trust in the state and public responsiveness. Within the framework of the relationship between participation and trust, the second hypothesis of our study is formulated as follows:

*H2: Participation positively and statistically significantly affects trust.*

The primary purpose of this study is to reveal whether participation has a mediating effect on the relationship between transparency and trust. In other words, it is assumed that ensuring citizens' participation in public processes will increase their perception of transparency and, thus, their trust in the government and public administrations. The literature includes various studies on the relationship between transparency, trust, and participation. For example, Kim and Lee (2012) found a positive relationship between e-participants' assessments of government transparency and their trust in local government. Wang et al. (2020) argue that government practices such as information, service, and participatory use increase citizens' perceptions of trust, transparency, and reputation, which in turn affect citizen compliance. Schmidhuber et al. (2020) found that a sense of being integrated into the political decision-making process increases trust in the public sector by mediating structural openness. Jameel et al. (2019) argue that e-government strengthens and positively mediates the relationship between good governance and public trust. Song and Lee (2016) concluded that citizens' use of social media increases the perceived transparency of the government, which in turn increases citizens' trust in the government. In their study on local governments, Arkorful et al. (2021) found strong relationships between transparency, trust, and participation and that increased transparency and trust encourage participation. Within the framework of the main objective of our study, the third hypothesis is formed as follows:

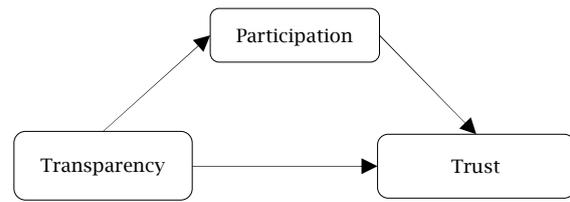
*H3: Participation has a positive and significant effect on the effect of transparency on trust.*

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research model

This study uses an explanatory, quantitative relational model. As far as this model is concerned, the perception of *transparency*, an independent variable, is expected to influence *trust*, a dependent variable, through the mediating variable of *participation*. The mediation model is used to understand how the relationship between the two variables can be divided into direct and indirect effects (Hayes, 2017). In this study, *participation* is considered a mediator between *transparency* and *trust*. The research model is given below.

**Figure 1. Research model**



#### 3.2. Sample

The study population consists of people living in Uşak, a city in Turkey. The city's total population is 339,019, of which 168,064 are male and 169,955 are female. The urban residents of the city are 225,570, while the rest of the population is rural residents. In total, 500 people received a questionnaire. However, 407 questionnaires were evaluated because some data were left blank.

There were 177 (43.5%) males and 230 (56.5%) females in the study. Of the participants, 37 (9.1%) were primary school graduates, 21 (5.2%) were secondary school graduates, 89 (21.9%) were high school graduates, 212 (52.1%) were associate's and Bachelor's degree graduates, 48 (11.8%) were postgraduate; 140 (34.4%) were between the ages of 18-24 years old, 92 (22.6%) between the ages of 25-34 years old, 93 (22.9%) between the ages of 35-55 years old, 47 (11.5%) between the ages of 45-55 years old, and 35 (8.6%) aged 55 years old and over. Of the participants, 63 (15.5%) were homemakers, 56 (13.8%) were workers, 19 (4.7%) were civil servants, 49 (12.0%) were retired, 85 (20.9%) were tradespeople, 31 (7.6%) were not working and 104 (25.6%) were students.

### 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### 4.1. Data collection and analysis

The statements measuring *transparency* and *trust* perceptions in Beshi and Kaur's (2020) study were used as data collection tools. Aldemir and Şen's (2020) study was utilized for *participation* statements. Before testing the hypothesized relationships within the scope of the research model, SPSS 21 and AMOS 24 programs were used to test the validity and reliability of the relevant statements. Confirmatory factor analysis of *transparency*, *trust*, and *participation* factors was conducted together. The average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values were used to test convergent validity. For convergent validity, AVE should be at least 0.50, and CR should be at least 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

As shown in Table 1, the factor loadings of each variable are greater than 0.70, the AVE of each variable is greater than 0.50 (0.612-0.739), and the CR is greater than 0.8 (0.923-0.887). This shows that convergence validity is achieved.

**Table 1.** Factor loading, average variance extracted, composite reliability

Variable	Item	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Transparency	Trn1	0.849	0.919	0.739
	Trn2	0.924		
	Trn3	0.825		
	Trn4	0.834		
Trust	Trst1	0.700	0.887	0.612
	Trst2	0.835		
	Trst3	0.864		
	Trst4	0.708		
	Trst5	0.791		
Participation	Prt1	0.789	0.923	0.705
	Prt2	0.858		
	Prt3	0.873		
	Prt4	0.893		
	Prt5	0.779		

The study conducted a discriminant validity test. For this test, the square root of the AVE must be higher than the correlation between the constructs for each construct (Khine, 2013). As shown in Table 2, discriminant validity was achieved.

**Table 2.** Discriminant validity

Variable	CR	AVE	Participation	Trust	Transparency
Participation	0.923	0.705	<b>0.840</b>		
Trust	0.887	0.612	0.734	<b>0.782</b>	
Transparency	0.919	0.739	0.789	0.747	<b>0.860</b>

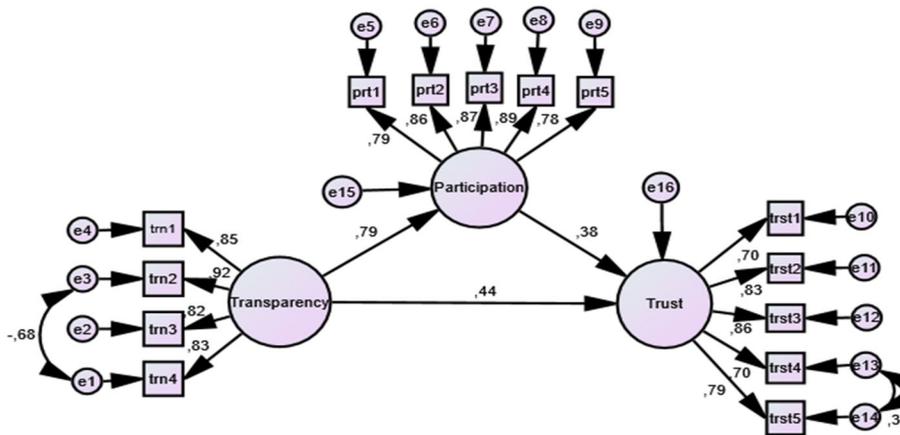
Note: *Italicized variables are the square root of AVE for each variable.*

**4.2. Hypotheses testing**

Figure 2 shows the path diagram of the structural model, and Table 3 shows the results of the mediation role.

The structural model showed a perfect fit with the data as indicated by the goodness of fit indices:  $X^2 / df = 2.65$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.97, consistency index (GFI) = 0.93, and root-mean-squared error associated (RMSEA) = 0.06.

**Figure 2.** The structural model



**Table 3.** The mediating role of participation in the effect of transparency on public trust

Variable	Participation		Trust	
	$\beta$	S.E.	$\beta$	S.E.
Transparency			0.746*	0.052
R <sup>2</sup>				0.556
Transparency	0.788*	0.050		
R <sup>2</sup>		0.620		
Transparency			0.443*	0.061
Participation			0.385*	0.066
R <sup>2</sup>				0.613

Indirect effect: 0.303; Confidence interval: 0.168-0.435

Note: \*  $p < 0.001$ .

As seen in Table 3, the total effect of transparency on trust is statistically significant, and H1 is accepted ( $\beta = 0.746$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). A positive path coefficient regression was obtained between transparency and participation ( $\beta = 0.788$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Likewise, a positive path coefficient and regression

coefficient between participation and trust ( $\beta = 0.385$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) were found significant, and H2 was accepted. The indirect effect between transparency and trust is 0.303, and the 95% confidence interval is 0.168-0.435. Since this interval does not include the value 0, the indirect effect is

statistically significant (Mehmetoglu, 2018). In this sense, the mediating role of *participation* in the positive effect of *transparency* on *trust* is seen, and *H3* is accepted. The hypothesis test results show that all three hypotheses are supported.

Variance accounted for (VAF) value is used to examine the strength of the mediating effect (Wong, 2016). The VAF value calculated in the study is 40.6. Since the value obtained is between 0.20 and 0.80, it shows a partial mediating effect (Hair et al., 2013).

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study investigates the mediating role of participation in the relationship between transparency and trust in a local government unit. In this context, Uşak, a medium-sized province in the Turkish administrative system, was selected, and data was collected from local people. With the data obtained, the research model representing the mediating role of participation in the effect of transparency on trust was tested.

First, we examined the impact of transparency and participation on trust. Consistent with numerous studies in the literature (Halachmi & Greiling, 2013; Krah & Mertens, 2023), the total effect of transparency on trust is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.746$ ). Again, in parallel with the studies in the literature (Schmidhuber et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020), a positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.385$ ) relationship was obtained between participation and trust.

Then, the mediating role of participation in the relationship between transparency and trust, which is the focus of the study, was analyzed. The indirect effect between transparency and trust is 0.303, the 95% confidence interval is 0.168–0.435, and the indirect effect is statistically significant since the confidence interval does not include 0. The VAF value indicating the strength of the mediating effect is calculated as 40.6. The value obtained indicates the existence of a partial mediating effect. In other words, it is seen that participation has an increasing role as a mediator in the positive effect of transparency on trust. Some studies have similar findings in the literature, although not precisely the same as our research model. Schmidhuber et al. (2020) found a partial mediating effect of individuals' perceptions of having meaningful opportunities for political participation on the impact of open government on trust. Another similar study was conducted by Kim and Lee (2012) in the context of e-government and e-participation in local governments. Their findings reveal that e-participants' degree of development through e-participation and perceived influence on decision-making are positively related to their assessment of government transparency, which contributes positively to their trust in the government.

As Bourgon (2007) points out, the role of governments and public administrations in the contemporary world is not only to fulfill the tasks assigned to them by law. Beyond this, it must also engage with citizens, share responsibilities, develop a common understanding of public problems by sharing more information, and find ways to involve citizens more in governance processes. This is particularly important for democratic governance and the development of active citizenship (Cuthill & Fien, 2005; Fung, 2015).

Well-functioning democratic governance and active citizenship mechanisms are essential not only for participation and transparency but also for principles such as effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, sustainability, and, above all, legitimacy and trust (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Jameel et al., 2019).

However, it is observed that democratic governance and active citizenship mechanisms are greatly affected by the cultural differences between countries (Ghose, 2005; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Especially in underdeveloped and developing societies where anti-bureaucratic culture is prevalent, the distance between the rulers and the ruled is greater (Rosilawati et al., 2021). This translates into lower transparency, participation, and trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Hartanto et al., 2021; Kosack & Fung, 2014). It is also argued that citizens are generally more reluctant to participate at the local level (Šaparnienė et al., 2021).

In our study, cultural characteristics are the main reason for participation's partial effect on the relationship between transparency and trust. Although various mechanisms for democratic governance and active citizenship have been established within the framework of legislation, there are problems in their operation. At both national and local levels, governance affairs are still approached within the framework of traditional political power relations. There is no questioning political culture from the past (Altınoğlu, 2022; Dursunoğlu & Katılmış, 2021). In addition, civil society organizations, among the most important actors of democratic governance, are often politically motivated. Other reasons include differentiated priorities of citizens, social and economic problems, lack of access to technology, education, and income levels.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our study examined the relationship between transparency, participation, and trust in a local government unit in Turkey, a developing country, in its unique cultural conditions. Our results show that transparency and participation affect trust. More important, however, is the partial mediating effect of participation on the relationship between transparency and trust. In other words, as participation increases, citizens' perception of transparency increases, which in turn increases trust in government and public administrations. For governments and public administrations, this suggests they need to strengthen legitimacy and trust by finding ways to involve citizens more in governance and decision-making processes. For citizens, it means that they should push governments and public administrations for democratic, transparent, effective, efficient, and accountable governance by demanding and enabling greater participation.

Of course, our study was carried out within the framework of some limitations. First, as mentioned above, it reflects Turkish culture. Second, it has a cross-sectional design. Data were collected from a local government unit selected from the Turkish administrative system. Therefore, it is impossible to say that the results we have obtained can be generalized to the entire field of public administration. In this context, there is a need for future studies in which cross-cultural comparisons

will be made to reveal differences at the local level. Another limitation is our model's focus on the relationship between transparency and trust. In future studies, a multidimensional perspective

that includes principles and values such as effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, responsiveness, and sustainability in the analysis will contribute to the related literature.

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