

Scandal as Constructivation: Trust Cultures and the Politics of Legitimacy in Southeast Asia

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This article theorizes political scandal in Southeast Asia as a performative and culturally embedded process rather than simple exposure of wrongdoing. Using the Dengvaxia vaccine controversy in the Philippines as a generative case, it introduces the concept of *trust cultures*: historically grounded and affectively charged frameworks through which publics evaluate credibility, sincerity, and moral authority. The analysis identifies three competing trust cultures—parental, technocratic, and journalistic—and examines how they interact through affective resonance, moral legibility, and narrative fit. These dynamics demonstrate that scandal is not merely revealed but performed, as competing actors stage claims to truth and legitimacy in ways that compel public interpretation. Extending beyond the Philippine case, the article proposes a Southeast Asian grammar of scandal marked by fragmented authority, affectively mobilized publics, and hybrid media environments. In doing so, it challenges liberal-democratic models and foregrounds cultural-political performance in understanding trust, legitimacy, and media power in the Global South.

Keywords: political scandal, trust cultures, Southeast Asia, legitimacy, hybrid media systems

The Dengvaxia controversy, which erupted in the Philippines in late 2017, was not merely a case of biomedical miscalculation or policy failure. It became a full-blown crisis of public trust, fueled by sensationalist coverage, polarized institutions, and emotionally charged appeals from grieving parents. Sanofi Pasteur's belated disclosure that its dengue vaccine posed risks for individuals without prior infection—after more than 800,000 Filipino children had been vaccinated—triggered a wave of outrage. However, what transformed the incident into a political scandal was not the disclosure itself, but how competing actors—health officials, populist lawyers, journalists, and bereaved families—struggled to define what counted as truth, who could be trusted, and how justice should be pursued.

This article reads the Dengvaxia controversy not only as a policy debacle or media event, but also as a performative conflict over trust. It introduces the concept of trust cultures: historically sedimented,

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culturally situated ways in which publics interpret credibility, sincerity, and moral authority.² Rather than treating trust as a quantifiable resource eroded by scandals, this approach centers on how trust is enacted and contested in the communicative staging of scandals.³ In contexts like the Philippines, where institutional legitimacy is uneven and media ecologies are highly emotionalized, trust cultures help explain why scandal persists, polarizes, or collapses into ambiguity.

Drawing on an interpretive analysis of competing narratives, actors, and affective performances, the article develops a framework for understanding how scandal unfolds through three interrelated processes: affective resonance (the emotional force of a claim), moral legibility (its perceived sincerity and ethical clarity), and narrative fit (its alignment with familiar cultural scripts). These processes help explain how trust cultures align or rupture in moments of moral controversy.

Beyond the Philippine case, the article contends that political scandals in Southeast Asia cannot be fully explained through liberal-democratic models that presume institutional repair and journalistic exposure. Instead, drawing on illustrative cases in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, it proposes a regional grammar of scandal—marked by fragmented authority, uneven institutions, affectively mobilized publics, and the persistence of postcolonial grievance. This grammar highlights how scandals in the region often fail to produce resolution or reform, but instead recalibrate legitimacy through renewing and contesting trust cultures within hybrid media environments.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four parts. First, it reviews dominant models of political scandal in communication research and underscores the need for a more culturally grounded framework. Second, it revisits the Dengvaxia vaccine controversy to show how three trust cultures—parental, technocratic, and journalistic—shaped the scandal’s moral and communicative terrain. Third, it theorizes the processes of affective resonance, moral legibility, and narrative fit through which these trust cultures converge or collide during moments of public crisis. Finally, it gestures toward a regional grammar of scandal rooted in trust cultures and affective publics in Southeast Asia, outlining pathways for future research on how scandals unfold in the region.

Rethinking Scandal: From Revelation to Performance, Context, and Trust

Dominant scholarship on political scandal—rooted in liberal-democratic contexts—treats scandal as a revelatory process: the exposure of wrongdoing that triggers public judgment and institutional reform. Yet this model presumes stable institutions, rational publics, and watchdog journalism—conditions that are

² The use of “trust cultures” draws from interpretive and relational theories of trust. It does not assume discrete or bounded cultural groups, but rather emphasizes patterned modes of evaluation shaped by history, affect, and public discourse.

³ This article focuses on “political scandals,” however, I will use the term “scandals” interchangeably throughout this article.

uneven or contested in postcolonial contexts.⁴ Even the performative turn in scandal studies, which emphasizes affect, dramaturgy, and symbolic contestation, tends to draw from liberal-democratic cases where institutional authority remains intact.

This review outlines three strands of literature that inform a rethinking of scandal in Southeast Asia. The first traces the limits of the revelatory model, the second highlights the contributions and constraints of the performative turn, and the third turns to the Global South and postcolonial interventions that foreground fractured legitimacy and contested trust. Together, these threads point to the need for a new framework—one grounded in trust cultures—to theorize how scandals operate in hybrid, effectively fragmented media environments.

Scandal as Revelation in Liberal-Democratic Models

In liberal-democratic theory, scandal is conventionally framed as a revelatory event—an interruption of normative order where hidden wrongdoing by public figures is brought to light, prompting moral indignation and institutional accountability. Within this framework, scandal serves as both exposure and catharsis: it reveals a breach in the social contract and, through public denunciation, symbolically restores democratic norms (Markovits & Silverstein, 1988). The press figures centrally in this process, performing its idealized role as the fourth estate: impartial, adversarial, and committed to the public benefit. Underlying this conception is an assumption of institutional coherence and public rationality—that civic outrage will be channeled into reform and that scandal cleanses as much as it wounds.

Markovits and Silverstein's (1988) foundational work positions scandal as both a cultural performance and a liberal-democratic mechanism for reinforcing civic order. For them, scandal functions as a collective reaffirmation of shared values; its drama stages the boundaries of acceptable public behavior, reinscribing the moral expectations of political life. The exposure of wrongdoing is not merely punitive—it is pedagogical, reminding citizens of the standards to which public officials must be held.

Thompson (2013) builds on this by theorizing scandal as a mode of *mediated visibility* shaped by modern media. His model emphasizes the communicative dynamics through which transgressions become public knowledge—relying on the circulation of credible accusations, compelling narratives, and moralizing discourses. Scandals follow a recognizable arc: revelation, outrage, media amplification, and institutional response. While attentive to power and media logic, Thompson's model retains a normative belief in the democratic potential of scandal, assuming that publicity exerts pressure on elites and facilitates public oversight.

Adut (2008), meanwhile, recasts scandal as *ritualized publicity*, foregrounding the social processes that make certain transgressions visible and scandalous while others remain unmarked. He underscores the role of tacit protections, institutional secrecy, and audience complicity in sustaining what is deemed

⁴ While the notion of "rational publics" may not always be explicit, it remains detectable in mainstream theories of media and democracy that foreground reasoned deliberation, consensus, and truth-tracking publics (Dahlgren, 2018; Habermas, 2001, 2006).

“scandalizable.” For Adut, scandal is not simply about the transgression itself but the breach of a protective silence. His contribution lies in illuminating the conditions under which scandal becomes possible: the performative staging of wrongdoing, the mobilization of audiences, and the suspension of routine discretion.

Together, these theorists help construct what might be termed the *revelatory model* of scandal: a normative framework in which scandal emerges as rupture and reckoning—unleashed through journalistic exposure, mediated by relatively stable institutions, and interpreted through shared civic norms. Even critical accounts, such as those cautioning against media sensationalism (Allern & Von Sikorski, 2018; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004a, 2004b) or warning of public desensitization, often retain this model’s core assumption that scandal plays a corrective role in democratic life. Yet, as Entman (2012) argues, the framing of political scandals is not a neutral matter of revelation but a highly contested process in which elites compete to define problems, assign blame, and shape public meaning—complicating the idea that scandal simply “emerges” and is universally legible.

This model, however, increasingly struggles to account for the contemporary conditions under which scandals unfold. Harmer and Stanyer (2016) note that the fragmentation of media systems and the rise of partisan information flows have undermined the moral coherence once presumed in scandal narratives. Neckel (2005) similarly observes that scandal no longer necessarily leads to accountability or institutional repair; instead, it may produce ambiguity, spectacle, or even deepen public distrust. These limitations are even more pronounced outside the liberal-democratic West, where institutional legitimacy is more tenuous, affective polarization is more pronounced, and scandal often fails to function as a moment of shared moral crisis or democratic correction.

In such contexts, scandal is less a transparent revelation and more a contested and strategic performance. Its meaning, consequences, and legitimacy are all subject to negotiation. The next section traces how recent scholarship has responded to these limitations through a *performative turn*—one that foregrounds drama, affect, and symbolic struggle, but still largely draws from liberal-democratic exemplars.

The Performative Turn in Scandal Studies

As scholars began to question the assumptions of liberal-democratic scandal models, a new emphasis emerged on the performative, affective, and symbolic dimensions of scandal. This performative turn does not reject the revelatory model outright, but critiques its presumption of coherence—of institutions capable of accountability, publics capable of consensus, and media able to mediate moral meaning. Instead, scandal is increasingly theorized as a drama of legitimacy, where truth is not simply uncovered, but enacted, negotiated, and contested.

Central to this shift is the notion that scandal is not a fixed event, but a cultural performance. Alexander (2011) posits that political life is fundamentally theatrical, with scandals serving as staged struggles over the authenticity and moral standing of public actors. In this dramaturgical view, what matters is not just what happened, but how it is narrated, framed, and received. Scandals unfold through scripts, symbols, and spectacle—inviting publics to take moral positions through emotionally resonant storylines.

Papacharissi (2015) similarly foregrounds the affective dimensions of political communication, showing how digital platforms facilitate the circulation of emotional narratives that sustain or contest authority. Scandal, in this context, becomes a mediated performance of outrage, solidarity, or betrayal—driven not only by facticity but by affective resonance. The construction of scandal thus relies on affective publics—communities bound not by rational deliberation, but by shared sentiments, moods, and moral intuitions.

Wedeen (2009) contributes a related insight from post-structural and ethnographic traditions, arguing that political legitimacy is often performed through rituals, spectacles, and ironic enactments of power. In her analysis of authoritarian regimes, the performativity of public life is not reducible to its sincerity or truth value; what matters is how legitimacy is dramatized, often through contradictory or absurd performances. This insight destabilizes the moral clarity presumed in liberal models, suggesting that scandal may function as a performance even in contexts where truth is malleable or strategically suspended.

This turn has expanded the analytical repertoire of scandal studies. Scholars have examined how scandals are dramatized through visual tropes (Greer & McLaughlin, 2017), celebrity logics (Hammarlin, 2021), and narrative scripts that draw on culturally specific idioms of shame, transgression, and purification (Fine, 2019). Rather than assuming that scandal leads to reform, these accounts show how it can reproduce power, generate ambivalence, or provide catharsis without consequence.

However, while the performative turn marks an important shift, it often remains tethered to cases from liberal-democratic settings where institutional scaffolding and journalistic authority remain partially intact. Performance is still largely theorized as a deviation from institutional normativity, rather than as a response to its collapse. Moreover, the affective publics at the heart of this turn are frequently treated as emergent but legible—capable of interpreting scandal within existing frameworks of moral meaning.

These assumptions are increasingly untenable in postcolonial and hybrid contexts, where publics are fragmented, institutions are distrusted, and scandal itself becomes a site of moral confusion or political manipulation. The next section turns to the Global South and postcolonial interventions that challenge the universality of both revelatory and performative models, offering alternative frameworks rooted in distinct histories, media cultures, and political imaginaries.

Global South and Postcolonial Interventions

Much of the comparative literature on scandal and political communication remains anchored in liberal-democratic paradigms, with Western Europe and North America functioning as the epistemic default (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2011, 2017). These models presume a normative media ecology—robust watchdog journalism, rational publics, shared civic norms, and linear structures of accountability. Even the performative turn, while attentive to affect and symbolism, often retains assumptions about institutional credibility and culturally legible publics. Such frameworks struggle to explain how scandal operates in postcolonial contexts, where trust is fractured, institutions are contested, and legitimacy is not a given but something constantly performed and negotiated. As Global South scholars have argued, these paradigms risk universalizing historically contingent liberal-democratic

ideals while marginalizing alternative political imaginaries and modes of mediation (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013; Wasserman, 2018).

Waisbord (2013) notes that even the normative ideals attached to journalism—such as impartiality, independence, and civic accountability—are deeply embedded in Western liberal thought. These ideals shape dominant assumptions about scandal: that it exposes wrongdoing, mobilizes public judgment, and ultimately reinforces democratic order. However, in many postcolonial societies, journalism is entangled in systems of patronage, clientelism, and shifting political alignments. McCargo's (2003) concept of *partisan polyvalence* captures this dynamic in Southeast Asia, where journalists often serve multiple, fluid allegiances rather than any abstract normative principle. In such contexts, scandal is not a moment of rupture but a mechanism for symbolic realignment, where competing actors stage rival claims to moral and political legitimacy.

In Southeast Asia, political science and governance scholarship disproportionately houses the study of scandals, making this problem particularly acute. Scandals are commonly examined as symptoms of corruption, elite impunity, or regulatory failure (e.g., Batalla, 2020, 2024; Jones, 2020; Lopez & Suryomenggolo, 2014; Quah, 2020). While these studies offer substantial explanations for the temporary erosion of institutional credibility, they rarely attend to the symbolic, affective, and communicative labor that renders scandal publicly legible and politically consequential. Tapsell (2022) challenges liberal-institutionalist approaches to Southeast Asian media politics, calling for closer attention to the affective and elite-driven dynamics of populist communication, particularly in the Philippine context. Ong and Cabañes (2018), by contrast, foreground the role of *networked disinformation* not merely as a deviation from journalistic norms but as a performative media practice that manufactures emotional resonance, affective credibility, and symbolic power.

In the Philippines, this reconfiguration is evident in the growing role of influencer-driven media ecosystems in shaping political scandal. Lanuza and Ong (2024) show how political operators increasingly bypass traditional journalism by relying on social media influencers and content creators who act as partisan narrators. These actors do not simply report on scandal; they frame it in ways that mobilize affective publics, reinforce in-group moralities, and sustain populist legitimacy. Soriano and Gaw (2022) describe this process as *networked political brokerage*, where YouTube personalities and other digital intermediaries displace journalistic authority by claiming proximity to the "authentic voice" of the people. In such systems, scandal becomes a tool not for institutional reform but for narrative warfare: to protect political allies, delegitimize critics, and fuel conspiratorial solidarity.

Postcolonial theorists offer crucial tools for understanding this dynamic. Appadurai (1996) and Chatterjee (2004, 2011) emphasize that publics in postcolonial states often engage the political not through formal institutions, but through vernacular practices—kinship, rumor, religious discourse, and localized moral hierarchies. In these contexts, affective judgments and relational moralities, rather than procedural

norms or journalistic standards, govern the evaluation of scandal. Trust is not abstract or institutional; it is culturally embedded, emotionally negotiated, and historically situated.⁵

Southeast Asia offers more than empirical variation—it raises fundamental questions about the conceptual underpinnings of scandal theory. In this region, scandal frequently fails to lead to democratic accountability or institutional reform. Instead, as Sinpeng and Tapsell (2020) and Tapsell (2020, 2022) demonstrate across cases in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, scandal often operates as a mediated spectacle that reinforces populist authority, distracts from systemic failures, or fuels elite political rivalries. Rather than serving as a mechanism of democratic exposure, scandal in these settings functions as a performative arena in which competing actors construct, rather than reveal, legitimacy.

The following section turns to the Dengvaxia controversy to explore how the scandal unfolds in a context marked by contested authority, affective publics, and fragmented institutions. Rather than introducing a theoretical framework at the outset, the analysis traces how various actors perform trust, blame, and legitimacy across media arenas. From this, the article develops the concept of trust cultures—not as an abstract model imposed on the case, but as a framework that emerges through interpretive engagement with it. By shifting focus from revelation to performance and from a temporary erosion of institutional credibility to cultural negotiation, this approach offers a way to theorize scandal in contexts where legitimacy is not presumed but must be actively constructed and contested.

The Dengvaxia Controversy: Background, Discursive Trajectory, and Analysis

The Dengvaxia controversy erupted in the Philippines in late 2017 after Sanofi Pasteur announced that its dengue vaccine posed increased risks of severe illness among individuals who had not previously been infected with dengue. The announcement triggered widespread public alarm, as the Aquino administration's 2016 program had already vaccinated more than 800,000 schoolchildren. What began as a biomedical concern rapidly became a full-blown political and moral crisis. Under President Duterte's administration, the immunization program was reframed as a scandal of elite negligence, institutional failure, and public betrayal.

At the heart of the conflict was a deep rupture between health and legal institutions. The Department of Health (DOH), including officials such as Dr. Janette Garin and Dr. Kenneth Hartigan-Go, defended the program's scientific legitimacy and compliance with global standards, asserting that no causal link had been proven between Dengvaxia and the reported deaths. In stark contrast, the Public Attorney's Office (PAO), led by Chief Persida Acosta, mounted a sensationalized legal and media campaign. This included exhumations of children allegedly killed by the vaccine, high-profile press conferences, and emotionally charged medico-legal reports. These actions helped frame the issue through the lens of medical populism (Lasco & Curato, 2019), using emotionally resonant imagery and testimonial grief to draw public sympathy and support.

⁵ This emphasis on cultural embeddedness does not reject institutional approaches outright; rather, it highlights that institutional trust often functions differently in contexts of historical and epistemic rupture.

News coverage played a pivotal role in transforming the controversy into a spectacle of accusation and indignation. Testimonies from grieving parents, congressional hearings, and confrontations between officials saturated both legacy and digital platforms. Journalistic representations often blurred the line between reporting and moral advocacy, reinforcing a public mood of outrage. Political actors weaponized the issue, with Duterte allies attacking the previous administration and critics accusing the Duterte government of exploiting the crisis for political gain. In this contested information space, the authority of science and expertise was destabilized. Competing narratives from scientists, lawyers, and bureaucrats clashed in public view, producing not epistemic clarity but narrative fragmentation and moral polarization.

The grieving parents emerged as the scandal's moral center, their visibility essential to PAO's claim of state betrayal. Their stories circulated widely—framed as either genuine cries for justice or as emotionally manipulated performances. As Mabale et al. (2024) note, parent-led grief became a central moral frame in the political use of vaccines in Philippine public discourse. In turn, this focus on affective suffering helped transform the scandal from a crisis of governance to a dispute over who can credibly speak on behalf of the people, the truth, and the nation.

Complicating the domestic turmoil were contradictory interventions from transnational actors. Statements by the World Health Organization and Sanofi were variably interpreted—as transparency for some, or evasion for others—revealing how global institutions may not stabilize public knowledge but instead amplify mistrust, especially in environments of already eroded institutional legitimacy.

The legal aftermath further underscored the entanglement of politics, law, and public health. While the Department of Justice (DOJ) initially filed charges against several Aquino-era officials, including Garin, Hartigan-Go, and Paulyn Ubial, many of these cases were subsequently dismissed. In 2024, the Sandiganbayan let the graft charges against Garin and others move forward, but the DOJ dropped several cases for insufficient evidence, explaining that some were refiled for procedural reasons rather than new information. These reversals illustrate the lasting ambiguity of the scandal, with blame and legitimacy remaining unsettled even years later.

Rather than being a discrete event with clear moral resolution, the Dengvaxia controversy evolved into a long-running discursive battleground—where bureaucrats, lawyers, parents, and journalists constructed divergent claims about causality, culpability, and care. This section sets the stage for analyzing the scandal not just as a failure of institutions but as a conflict of trust cultures, each performing and contesting authority within a hybrid and emotionally charged media environment.

Analyzing the Conflict: Performances of Truth, Blame, and Legitimacy

The Dengvaxia controversy did not merely expose institutional failure—it enacted a collision of competing trust cultures. In this article, *trust cultures* are defined as patterned, culturally shaped ways in which communities interpret who is trustworthy, what counts as credible, and how legitimacy is performed—particularly under conditions of uncertainty, rupture, or loss (Mendoza, 2025). Foundational trust theorists such as Gambetta (1988), Giddens (1990), Hardin (2002), and Luhmann (1979/2017) have foregrounded

trust as a function of systemic stability, strategic delegation, or rational choice under modern conditions. Building on, but also moving beyond, these traditions, this article foregrounds a complementary approach: trust as an affectively charged, interpretive act. Following scholars such as Frederiksen (2014), Hamm, Möllering, and Darcy (2024), and Six (2014), trust here is seen not as a fixed attitude or institutional metric, but as a situated cultural practice shaped by relationality, vulnerability, and moral evaluation. In moments of scandal, trust cultures do not simply reflect the breakdown of legitimacy—they actively co-produce it, shaping which narratives gain traction, whose claims are deemed credible, and how publics orient themselves within contested fields of meaning.

The conflict was not merely over biomedical facts or policy processes, but over who had the authority to speak credibly in a fragmented, emotionally charged media environment. At a time when institutional legitimacy is fragile and publics are shaped by the affective dynamics of hybrid media systems and disinformation networks (Chadwick, 2017; Ong & Cabañes, 2018), trust cannot be assumed—it must be performed, mediated, and contested. The Dengvaxia controversy, situated at the intersection of grief, science, populist rhetoric, and media spectacle, provides a critical site for examining how trust cultures are activated and negotiated. In this context, three trust cultures—*parental*, *technocratic*, and *journalistic*—structured the scandal's affective and interpretive terrain. Each offered a distinct basis of legitimacy, narrative style, and mode of public appeal, underscoring how trust is not merely lost or restored but constructed through culturally embedded performances of truth and blame (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Lecheler, 2020).

The parental trust culture was grounded in lived experience and testimonial grief. Parents, often appearing at press briefings or legislative hearings, narrated their loss in ways that transformed private mourning into public indictment. These narratives framed the controversy not as a technical dispute, but as a profound moral failure of state care. This trust culture was curated and amplified by the Public Attorney's Office (PAO), whose chief, Persida Acosta, strategically positioned herself as a defender of the people against medical elites. Holding framed photos and autopsy results before cameras, Acosta often claimed during interviews that she was doing this for justice. These acts highlighted the scandal as a breach of both physical and bureaucratic trust, with suffering serving as both evidence and a call to action.

Parental claims to credibility rested on grief made public. Their authority stemmed not from institutional standing, but from the visible and deeply personal experience of loss. In this register, truth was performed rather than proven—it resided in the testimony of parents who transformed private mourning into a moral indictment of the state. The sight of bereaved mothers and fathers became a form of evidence, making their words difficult to contest within the scandal's affective terrain.

The technocratic trust culture, performed by Department of Health (DOH) officials and medical experts, drew legitimacy from global standards, scientific processes, and procedural accountability. Former Health Secretary Janette Garin emphasized that the immunization program followed World Health Organization protocols, stating that there is no scientific basis to say Dengvaxia caused the deaths (Serapio & Morales, 2017). These appeals were framed through biomedical logics: probabilistic reasoning, ethical review, and statistical caution. However, this mode of communication struggled to resonate amid affectively saturated narratives. What technocratic actors viewed as responsible transparency was often perceived as

detachment or deflection. Scientific uncertainty—while normatively expected—was interpreted as institutional ambiguity. The authority of science was not dismissed outright, but overwhelmed by its inability to speak meaningfully to grief, pain, and urgency.

For technocratic actors, legitimacy was anchored in scientific premises: epidemiological data, international protocols, and professional expertise. They insisted that truth could only be established scientifically through methodical procedures, cautious interpretation, and deference to biomedical norms. Yet precisely because it was couched in numbers and probability, this mode of truth-telling often failed to connect emotionally. Against the urgency of parents' grief, the technical idiom of scientific caution appeared evasive or detached, undermining its persuasive force in the public arena.

The journalistic trust culture, which was enacted through both legacy and digital media, mediated and magnified these competing claims. This culture emphasized narrative coherence, affective visibility, and adversarial framing.⁶ News coverage frequently highlighted crying parents, courtroom clashes, and dramatic testimony. Headlines like "DOJ Indicts Garin, 19 Others Over Alleged Dengvaxia-linked Deaths" (Lagrimas, 2019) crystallized the scandal as a drama of betrayal and accountability. While some outlets included expert perspectives, the dominant media grammar favored emotional intensity over calibration. Talk shows and commentaries echoed the indignation of parents while interrogating state actors, producing a dramaturgy that reinforced the scandal's spectacle. On social media, hashtags such as #JusticeForDengvaxiaVictims circulated with personal testimonies, creating viral loops where affect and outrage became central currencies of attention.

Journalistic actors positioned themselves as arbiters of visibility and coherence. Their legitimacy rested on the ability to frame competing accounts into recognizable storylines of accountability and betrayal. Here, truth was not discovered in records or experiments, but dramatized through narratives that resonated with public emotions. By amplifying parental testimony and staging conflict between officials and critics, journalists rendered complex disputes intelligible as scandal—privileging affective coherence over the cautious language of technocracy.

Taken together, these trust cultures were never neatly bounded spheres. They intersected, collided, and at times reinforced one another in ways that animated the scandal's public life. Journalistic storytelling dramatized parental grief, placing bereaved voices at the moral center of national discourse. In contrast, technocratic actors struggled to defend their claims in a communicative environment that rewarded affective resonance more than biomedical precision. The press consistently overshadowed appeals to scientific protocol and statistical reasoning with the visibility of mourning and the dramaturgy of confrontation. Table 1 presents a summary of how these trust cultures were performed in Dengvaxia.

⁶ "Journalistic trust culture" refers here to how media organizations construct credibility and narrative legitimacy—not a normative endorsement of their accuracy or ethics.

Table 1. Performed Trust Cultures in the Dengvaxia Scandal.

Trust culture	Key actors	Basis of trust	Performance style	Public appeal
Parental	Bereaved families, amplified by PAO	Lived experience, embodied suffering	Testimonial grief, public mourning, moral witness	Evokes emotional identification and moral urgency
Technocratic	DOH officials, allied health experts	Scientific protocol, procedural legitimacy	Data-driven explanation, appeals to global standards	Appeals to rational authority, struggles with affective resonance
Journalistic	Mainstream and digital media	Narrative coherence, visibility, public accountability	Emotional storytelling, adversarial framing	Amplifies scandal through dramatization and repetition

The interplay of these cultures produced intensity but not closure. None succeeded in securing interpretive dominance: Each spoke truths that were powerful within their own moral grammar, but ultimately incommensurable with the others. What emerged was less a resolution than a stalemate—a contest of competing truths that neither courts nor official investigations could settle. Like many other Philippine scandals, Dengvaxia eventually slipped into the background of public life: unresolved in law, unsettled in memory, and unrepaired as a moral rupture.

Yet the importance of Dengvaxia lies not only in its inconclusiveness but also in how it exposes the ambivalent quality of Philippine democracy. As Lenard (2007, 2015) argues, democracy depends not only on vertical trust (between citizens and representatives) and horizontal trust (among citizens) but also on a vigilant form of mistrust that keeps institutions accountable. In the Philippines, however, the public often defaults not to vigilance but to distrust, a corrosive stance that undermines compliance and corrodes the legitimacy of institutions. The Dengvaxia controversy vividly demonstrates this default orientation: Citizens demanded accountability yet distrusted the very courts, agencies, and experts charged with providing it.

This paradox resonates with Webb's (2017, 2018) account of democratic ambivalence: Publics simultaneously affirm and deny democracy, saying "yes" to ideals of accountability and "no" to institutions perceived as corrupt or ineffectual. Outrage over Dengvaxia affirmed democratic values of transparency and justice, yet skepticism toward legal and scientific authorities denied their ability to deliver those values. This is not a fleeting contradiction but a structural feature of Philippine democracy—a condition in which affirmation and negation coexist perpetually.

Such ambivalence points to deeper disjunctures in the country's postcolonial political culture. Citizens expect institutions to arbitrate truth and enforce accountability, yet legitimacy is equally claimed through affective testimony, relational authority, and narrative performance. This reflects a longer trajectory in Philippine political life shaped by colonial legacies and local cultural logics (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005; Agpalo, 1996; Aguilar, 1998; Cannell, 1999; Contreras, 2002; Iletto, 1998; Pertierra, 1988; Roces, 1998). Scandals in this setting are not just temporary erosions of institutional credibility, but stages where competing logics of legitimacy are enacted. This highlights the limits of mainstream scholarship on Philippine

politics, which too often reduces scandal to corruption, elite impunity, or institutional weakness, overlooking the cultural and affective practices that sustain public life.⁷

The Dengvaxia scandal, then, reveals more than a clash of parental, technocratic, and journalistic trust cultures. It demonstrates how scandal in the Philippines reproduces a cycle of outrage, distrust, and forgetting—a cycle that unsettles yet paradoxically sustains democratic life. By refusing resolution, Dengvaxia discloses a democracy lived ambivalently: affirmed and doubted, dramatized and deferred, perpetually demanded yet continually distrusted.

Theorizing Trust Cultures: From Exposure to “Constructivation”

Dominant models of political scandal tend to frame it as a linear sequence: a transgression is exposed, public trust is breached, and legitimacy is either restored or permanently damaged. This logic assumes normative stability, institutional coherence, and a shared moral horizon against which wrongdoing is measured. In postcolonial contexts like the Philippines, however, scandal does not simply emerge from exposure. It is constructed—publicly, performatively, and contentiously—through conflicts over *how* truth is recognized, *who* can credibly claim it, and *why* certain narratives become more persuasive than others.

This “constructivation” (construction and activation) unfolds within and through trust cultures—socially embedded, historically shaped frameworks for interpreting credibility, moral authority, and public accountability. Trust cultures are not reducible to fixed attitudes or generalized levels of confidence in institutions. Instead, they are relational, situational, and culturally patterned ways of discerning who is trustworthy, what counts as valid evidence, and how legitimacy is enacted and recognized. In contexts where publics approach institutions with a default posture of suspicion, constructivation takes on heightened volatility: Trust cultures are activated ambivalently, shaped by social position, and animated by shifting combinations of truth claims and legitimacy performances.

In the arena of scandal, these trust cultures are not merely present but tested, as publics respond to overlapping and often contradictory performances of truth. Whether they align or fracture determines whether a scandal captures wide resonance, deepens polarization, or lingers without resolution. This dynamic materializes through three interconnected processes, as shown in the previous analysis:

- **Affective Resonance**—Trust claims must elicit emotional recognition. Affective resonance refers to the degree to which a performance of truth activates culturally embedded feelings—grief, outrage, betrayal, or care—that compel public attention. In the Dengvaxia controversy, bereaved parents’ testimony resonated not because it resolved biomedical uncertainty, but because it invoked a deep

⁷ Even Filipino political communication itself remains undertheorized, which convinces me that political science, sociology, and communication studies scholars need to work together more explicitly. No other major attempt has been made since Asuncion-Lande and Lande’s (1992) pioneering effort to situate Philippine political communication within its cultural and institutional context.

cultural grammar of parental protection and moral injury. Scandal materializes effectively when claims feel true.

- **Moral Legibility**—Not all truth claims are read as sincere or morally grounded. Moral legibility refers to the clarity with which an actor's positioning, demeanor, and symbolic gestures register as credible within a given cultural field. A grieving mother, a bureaucrat citing international protocols, or a lawyer brandishing autopsy reports are each morally legible to different publics depending on how their performance aligns with dominant norms of sincerity, sacrifice, and proximity to suffering. Scandal unfolds through these readings, not just through evidence.
- **Narrative Fit**—Scandals do not erupt in a vacuum; they are interpreted through familiar cultural scripts. Narrative fit refers to how well a particular account of wrongdoing aligns with preexisting stories that publics already know—of elite impunity, state abandonment, or righteous resistance. Trust cultures provide the interpretive scaffolding that allows certain narratives to “make sense” while others appear implausible or irrelevant. In Dengvaxia, the framing of state betrayal resonated with longstanding narratives of official neglect and the expendability of the poor.

Together, these processes govern whether trust cultures align or rupture during moments of scandal. Alignment occurs when performances of truth resonate affectively, register as morally legible, and fit dominant narrative expectations. Rupture occurs when trust claims clash—when one actor's performance feels cold, implausible, or illegible to others. Scandal persists when no single trust culture achieves interpretive dominance, leading to prolonged moral contestation.

This framework challenges the conventional framing of scandal as a temporary erosion of institutional trust. Instead, it locates trust at the heart of scandal's construction—as something enacted, negotiated, and made meaningful through culturally specific modes of interpretation. Trust is not simply lost or regained; it is staged, felt, and fought over.

The next section extends this theorization to the Southeast Asian context, arguing that scandal must be understood not only in terms of institutional design or media systems but also as part of a regional grammar of political life shaped by deeply rooted trust cultures and postcolonial histories of authority, truth, and accountability.

Scandals in Southeast Asia

The Dengvaxia controversy, when examined as a clash of trust cultures, offers insights into the dynamics of political scandal in Southeast Asia—not as the straightforward exposure of wrongdoing, but as a contested, culturally embedded performance of blame, truth, and legitimacy. These insights extend beyond the Philippine case to illuminate a broader regional grammar of scandal. This grammar is shaped by fragmented authority, emotionally and morally activated publics, and the personalization of grievance within hybrid media ecologies. In such contexts, scandal rarely functions as a mechanism of institutional correction.

Rather, it represents moments of “trust culture constructivation” where different actors perform, contest, and reconfigure claims to legitimacy.⁸

Fragmented Authority and Hybrid Trust Regimes

As demonstrated in Dengvaxia, Southeast Asian scandals unfold within fragmented fields of authority, where no single institution can claim epistemic or moral monopoly. Political leadership in the region often operates within informal hierarchies of charisma, paternalism, and proximity, shaped by colonial legacies and local patronage systems (Pye & Pye, 2010; Teehankee, 2014). Formal bureaucracies coexist—and often compete—with familial actors, religious leaders, legal entrepreneurs, and media personalities, each vying for credibility across differentiated publics.

This institutional pluralism, visible in the clashing truth claims of health officials and legal actors in the Dengvaxia case, resonates across the region. In Malaysia’s 1MDB scandal, technocratic rebuttals were undermined by public disbelief rooted in long-standing perceptions of elite corruption (Quah, 2020). In Indonesia, the omnibus protests pitted labor groups and civil society against state reformers who failed to persuade the public of their moral authority (Radue, 2022). These scandals did not emerge because of a lack of information, but because information was interpreted through conflicting trust cultures that made consensus elusive.

Moral and Affective Publics

Scandals in Southeast Asia are rarely settled through evidence alone. They are mediated by *affective publics* (Papacharissi, 2015) whose interpretive and emotional energies are activated by perceived moral failures. In Dengvaxia, it was not the statistical debate over causality that captured national attention, but the image of mourning parents, amplified by a populist lawyer and sensationalized by mainstream media. This affective intensity was not incidental—it was constitutive of how the scandal became intelligible.

Similar patterns appeared across the region. In Thailand, anti-monarchy scandals were animated by emotionally charged narratives of injustice and historical grievance, often amplified on digital platforms where young activists framed their resistance as a moral obligation (Sinpeng, 2020). In Malaysia, the moral outrage over 1MDB was not just about financial mismanagement but also about national betrayal—a theme made legible through cultural scripts of honor, shame, and duty.

These cases underscore a central point: Publics in Southeast Asia are not passive audiences of scandal but co-producers of its emotional and moral force. As Mashuri, Putra, and Montiel (2022) note, Southeast Asian political life is deeply shaped by moralized policies and emotionally charged dynamics. These processes can be seen in scandals, where moralized framing and emotional resonance heighten

⁸ This framing does not suggest that institutional reform is irrelevant or impossible in Southeast Asia, but rather that scandal often plays out symbolically and affectively before, or instead of, institutional redress.

perceived blameworthiness—dynamics that dominate the region’s media landscape and are central to trust culture alignment and rupture.

Populist Styles and Mediated Grievance

While “medical populism” aptly captures the rhetorical mode of Persida Acosta in Dengvaxia (Lasco & Curato, 2019), populist styles more broadly—marked by anti-elitism, personalization, and moral absolutism—are key drivers of how scandal is interpreted across Southeast Asia.⁹ In the Philippines, President Duterte frequently re-narrated scandals as betrayals by elites and used informal channels, including late-night speeches, to frame political conflict in moral terms (Tapsell, 2022). In Indonesia and Malaysia, populist leaders likewise blur institutional lines, weaponize legal cases, and personalize grievances to reinforce their moral positioning.

These styles thrive in hybrid media systems where social media virality, not institutional authority, shapes scandal’s trajectory (George & Venkiteswaran, 2019; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020). The circulation of affect and moral signaling—what Deuze (2021) frames as part of an increasingly affective and immersive “media life”—enables publics to engage scandals less through deliberation than through feelings of anger, betrayal, or solidarity.

Toward a Regional Grammar of Scandal

What may be slowly emerging is a *regional grammar of scandal*—a patterned way in which scandals are constructed, understood, and contested in Southeast Asia. This grammar is characterized by:

- Symbolic struggles over trust rather than temporary erosions of institutional credibility.
- Affective and moral publics rather than rational-critical ones.
- Populist and paternal performances of legitimacy rather than institutional rectification.
- Epistemic fragmentation, where competing trust cultures coexist with minimal convergence.

This grammar does not negate the relevance of media systems, legal structures, or civic norms. However, it highlights the limits of dominant models that assume a linear arc from exposure to accountability and challenges the idea that scandal necessarily repairs democratic legitimacy (Entman, 2012; Harmer & Stanyer, 2016; Thompson, 2013). Instead, in Southeast Asia, scandal often reproduces distrust, redraws symbolic boundaries, and recalibrates the terms of legitimacy without necessarily leading to institutional reform.

Conclusion

This article has advanced a cultural-performative theorization of political scandal in Southeast Asia through the lens of trust cultures. Centering on the Dengvaxia controversy in the Philippines, it argued that

⁹ The term follows Lasco and Curato (2019) and is used to describe a rhetorical style that simplifies health crises, personalizes blame, and claims moral authority on behalf of the people.

scandals are not simply a rupture caused by transgression or a temporary erosion of institutional credibility, but a contested process of “constructivation”—wherein truth, blame, and legitimacy are performed and interpreted through culturally specific frameworks of trust. Rather than viewing scandal as a linear decline in trust, the article emphasized the patterned and public rearticulation of competing trust cultures—parental, technocratic, and journalistic—that shaped the controversy’s affective and moral terrain.

In proposing the concept of trust cultures as interpretive frameworks that filter and stage political conflicts, the article contributes to global scandal research by gesturing toward a Southeast Asian grammar of political scandals. This framework foregrounds the region’s hybrid media systems, historically uneven institutions, and emotionally engaged publics—not as deficiencies, but as constitutive features of how scandal circulates and matters. By situating the Dengvaxia case alongside regional parallels, such as Malaysia’s 1MDB, Indonesia’s omnibus protests, and Thailand’s monarchy-related controversies, the article calls for a more grounded understanding of scandal that resists the universalization of liberal-democratic models and instead attends to contextually embedded forms of political contestation.

Nonetheless, the scope of this intervention is limited. As a single-case interpretive study, it cannot claim regional representativeness. While the framework of trust cultures offers conceptual traction, its broader applicability across differing Southeast Asian contexts remains to be tested. Moreover, the article foregrounded cultural and communicative dimensions at the expense of deeper structural analyses of media capture, legal institutions, digital surveillance, and economic precarity, which undoubtedly shape the scandal’s construction and circulation.

These limitations point not to a closure, but to new openings for research. Future studies might ask:

- How do trust cultures vary across different Southeast Asian political regimes, and under what conditions do they align, compete, or collapse?
- What role do platform architectures and algorithmic logics play in mediating the affective circulation of scandal across publics?
- How do scandals involving gendered, indigenous, or religious publics activate alternative trust cultures that complicate dominant moral grammars?
- What forms of narrative repair, forgetting, or endurance follow in the wake of scandal—especially in contexts where resolution is elusive or deliberately deferred?

Finally, this article invites further dialogue across disciplines. Scandal research must continue to engage not only with institutions and media systems but also with cultural studies, sociology, trust research, and affect theory to more fully account for how political legitimacy is imagined, disrupted, and recalibrated in the Global South. By thinking with and beyond Dengvaxia, the hope is not to universalize a new model, but to make space for more situated, plural, and ethically attuned ways of understanding political scandal as a communicative phenomenon.

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