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Public Trust as a Bridge between Technology, Society, and Sustainability

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***Abstract*— The accelerating processes of digital and energy transformation are fundamentally reshaping contemporary societies, economies, and governance systems. While technological innovation and the transition to sustainable energy are essential for long-term development, their success increasingly depends on the level of public trust. In this context, trust emerges as a critical factor and a central mechanism linking technological advancement with societal acceptance and sustainability outcomes.**

Growing concerns related to data privacy, algorithmic opacity, misinformation, and perceived inequalities in energy access challenge public trust and, consequently, the legitimacy of institutional and corporate actors, as well as broader systems of governance and security. The discussion is positioned within an interdisciplinary framework that integrates perspectives from technological sciences, communication studies, and sustainability governance. The present study aims to examine the key components of public trust, as well as the factors generating uncertainty in the context of technological transformation.

The author's contribution lies in advancing the existing scholarly debate on the social dimensions of technological transformation by offering practical insights for experts and organizations seeking to align innovation with societal expectations through trust-based approaches.

***Keywords*: trust; digital transformation; strategic communication; ethical governance; sustainability.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Public trust in technology is multifaceted and wide-ranging, involving diverse analytical perspectives and research approaches. Technological transformation in the modern digital age is generating profound and multidimensional changes across all spheres of social life. The Industry 5.0 paradigm, based on the interaction between people and technology, creates new opportunities for innovation, efficiency, and sustainable development, while simultaneously posing significant challenges related to trust in technology, the organizations that develop and manage it, and the institutions responsible for regulatory oversight.

The lack of a global consensus on technology governance, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks reinforces perceptions of uncertainty and mistrust among social groups. Risks such as data breaches, algorithmic opacity, the cumulative effects of technology scandals, disinformation, and expanding digital surveillance practices undermine trust and call into question the legitimacy of technological progress. Systemic manifestations of distrust are further exacerbated by risks associated with artificial intelligence, growing digital inequality, and the migration of a significant portion of social interaction to virtual environments. These processes create conditions for social isolation, online harassment, and various forms of digital coercion, while simultaneously reinforcing asymmetries in access to technology and information.

In the context of growing cyber threats, the so-called zero-trust model has gained prominence [1] [2], transforming traditional security approaches from the "trust but verify" logic to the "never trust, always verify" principle. Furthermore, the accelerated development of automated technologies creates conditions for new, often unpredictable risks that require adequate communication and management responses.

Although positive trends in trust levels can be observed in certain sectors, concerns continue to act as significant barriers to their full public acceptance and support. In this sense, technological innovations, in synergy with dynamic political and social processes, act as a factor with a dual impact: on the one hand, as a driver of development, competitiveness, and sustainability; on the other, as a source of growing public distrust, uncertainty, and skepticism. This necessitates the development of systematic debates and integrative frameworks that combine technological, social, governance, and communication solutions within a human-centered

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paradigm. Within this framework, the technology sector, ethical governance, and stakeholder engagement play a key role in promoting both sustainable development and trust.

At the same time, technology serves as a key catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, enabling the adoption of green and eco-friendly technologies, the development of renewable energy, the implementation of circular economy principles, and the use of innovative solutions such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and smart city infrastructures. At first glance, this may seem paradoxical. Nevertheless, it can reasonably be argued that trust serves as a central connecting mechanism between technological development and sustainability.

In this sense, sustainable development requires a balanced approach in which technological solutions are integrated with strategic communication, ethical governance, and active public trust-building as a prerequisite for their effective and inclusive implementation.

II. Materials and methods

The subject of this study is, by its very nature, multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary.

The methodological tools used in the study include desk research, content analysis, document analysis, comparative analysis, and a deductive approach. The study is based on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates perspectives from communication studies, the management of technological development and implementation, and research in the field of sustainable development. Scientific publications and strategic as well as empirical data from the Edelman Trust Barometer have been analyzed. Additionally, the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence: A European Approach to Excellence and Trust is utilized, which provides a conceptual framework for examining the relationship between technological development and public trust, and more specifically, the potential significant impact of AI on our society and the need to build trust. The aim of the study is to identify key relationships between technological innovation, institutional legitimacy, and sustainable development that influence public trust, in order to more clearly outline the research framework of trust as a bridge between technology, society, and sustainability.

III. Results and Discussion

This study aims to contribute new insights to the academic debate on the relationship between technological progress and sustainable development. It is based on the understanding that technological progress does not automatically lead to sustainability, but rather requires purposeful management of its social, ethical, and institutional dimensions.

The central thesis is linked to the premise that contemporary technological transformation requires a process of dual adaptation. On the one hand, it should be noted that individuals and organizations must develop technological competencies and the capacity to adapt quickly to innovations. On the other hand, the technologies themselves must be designed and managed in accordance with human values, ethical principles, and societal expectations. In this sense, technological development cannot be considered sustainable without the integration of a "human face," i.e., an orientation toward human well-being, dignity, and security. This interdependence between human adaptation and human-centered technological design positions trust as a key mediator and connecting mechanism in the processes of digital and social transformation.

At the same time, it must be clearly recognized that technological progress is inextricably linked to institutional trust, which plays a critical role in mitigating risk and ensuring regulatory protection for citizens. From this perspective, sustainable development requires a balanced interplay between innovation, regulation, and trust, in which technologies are embedded within a framework that guarantees security, transparency, and the protection of the public interest.

Research and Findings: From Empirical Evidence to Theoretical Insights

The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals a significant shift from broad, institutional trust to a more isolated and localized form of trust. Distrust is increasingly becoming the default, with only one-third of respondents stating that most people can be trusted.

This contraction of trust is accompanied by growing social fragmentation and polarization, reflected in widening trust gaps between income groups and declining trust in institutions. Trust is increasingly concentrated in immediate circles such as employers, CEOs, and personal networks, rather than in governments or global systems. At the same time, economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, and the legacy of crises such as COVID-19 have intensified skepticism toward authority and expertise.

The consequences of this transformation are significant. First, there is growing resistance to technological change, particularly regarding artificial intelligence, where a majority in key economies express distrust and concerns about transparency. Second, rising nationalism is evident in the growing preference for local over global actors. Third, societies are showing a reduced capacity for collective action, particularly in areas such as climate policy. Finally, there has been a significant decline in optimism, with only 15% of respondents in developed markets believing that future generations will be better off.

In response to these trends, the report introduces the concept of "trust brokering," highlighting the role of institutions especially employers—as intermediaries capable of restoring trust. By translating complex global challenges into tangible and locally meaningful actions, these actors can serve as critical links between systemic change and individual experience. [3].

Data from the 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer [4] further shows that trust, traditionally associated with progress, cooperation, and institutional legitimacy, is under increasing pressure and is gradually shrinking to narrower, closer social circles. This trend calls into question the sustainability of social systems that, by their very nature, rely on extended networks of trust rather than limited, closed communities.

In this context, a critical question arises: can we speak of an "implosion of trust" a process in which trust does not disappear entirely, but rather becomes compressed, fragmented, and localized? If trust withdraws from

institutions and concentrates in personal and informal relationships, what are the consequences for governance, innovation, and sustainable development?

From a sustainability perspective, this phenomenon is twofold. On the one hand, localized trust can strengthen internal cohesion within smaller communities and networks. On the other hand, the weakening of institutional trust undermines the capacity for collective action on a broader scale, and this depends on the type of coordinated efforts for example, those needed to address global challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and social inequalities.

Therefore, the key question is not whether trust is declining, but how it is transforming and how it can be reimagined as a resource for resilience. Is it possible to develop a new model of "distributed trust" that combines local proximity with institutional legitimacy? And what is the role of technology in this process will it deepen fragmentation, or can it serve as a mechanism for restoring trust through transparency, participation, and accountability?

In this sense, sustainability in the digital age requires not only the management of resources and technologies, but also the strategic management of trust as a form of social capital. It is precisely at this intersection that the need arises for new communication and management approaches capable of restoring the connection between institutions, technologies, and society.

The interdependence between trust and sustainability becomes increasingly evident when viewed through the lens of contemporary global trends. Diminishing optimism about the future significantly reduces people's willingness to support long-term strategies, including investments in clean energy, sustainable mobility, and inclusive social policies. When expectations for the future wane, so does the motivation to participate in collective efforts that require deferred but shared benefits.

The findings of the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026 clearly show that sustainable transformation cannot be achieved without trust. It should not be understood simply as a relational or emotional construct, but as a form of institutional and social infrastructure that enables economic, environmental, and societal transitions.

In the context of declining trust in government, business is increasingly viewed as a stabilizing force in society. It is expected not only to deliver economic value but also to contribute to social cohesion, ethical governance, and constructive public dialogue. Through their policies, partnerships, and tangible actions, organizations have the capacity to mitigate negative externalities and actively drive positive social change.

Public Trust: Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Perspectives

Public trust is widely recognized as a fundamental element in the functioning of modern societies, especially in contexts characterized by increasing complexity, uncertainty, and rapid technological change. It serves as a critical mechanism that enables cooperation, reduces perceived risks, and supports the legitimacy of institutional and organizational actors.

From a classical sociological perspective, Niklas Luhmann conceptualized trust as a mechanism for reducing social complexity. In situations where individuals cannot fully assess risks or predict outcomes, it allows them to act despite incomplete information [5]. This interpretation positions trust as a cognitive and systemic tool that facilitates decision-making in an uncertain environment.

Similarly, Francis Fukuyama defines it as a form of social capital embedded in shared norms and values that enable cooperation within societies [6]. From this perspective, high-trust societies demonstrate greater capacity for innovation, economic development, and institutional effectiveness, highlighting the macro-level implications of trust.

In contemporary empirical research, Edelman, through his Edelman Trust Barometer, conceptualizes it as the expectation that institutions government, business, the media, and NGOs will act competently, ethically, and in the public interest [7].

This definition reflects a normative and evidence-based understanding of trust, linking it directly to accountability, transparency, and ethical governance.

Empirical studies further confirm that trust is a key factor influencing the adoption and diffusion of innovations. Higher institutional levels are associated with increased willingness to adopt technological and policy innovations, as well as with a stronger perception of legitimacy [8], [9]. Furthermore, data from the European Commission, particularly through Eurobarometer, show that trust significantly influences public support for policies, technological transitions, and broader processes of social change [10].

Overall, public trust can be understood as a multidimensional construct that integrates cognitive, relational, and institutional dimensions.

The stance of key institutional sources on public trust

- ✓ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development emphasizes trust as a cornerstone of effective governance, linking it to transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement [8].
- ✓ The World Bank highlights trust as essential for policy implementation, institutional legitimacy, and economic development [9].
- ✓ The European Commission, through Eurobarometer, measures citizens' trust in institutions and technologies across Europe, demonstrating its role in policy acceptance and social cohesion [10].

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that "given the potential significant impact of AI on our society and the need to build trust, Europe has a duty to anchor its developments in this field in its values and fundamental human rights, such as human dignity and the protection of privacy. "On Artificial Intelligence - A European approach to excellence and trust" presents policy options that enable the reliable and secure development of AI in Europe while fully respecting the values and rights of European citizens.

The main building blocks of the White Paper are:

- ✓ the policy framework, which sets out measures to coordinate efforts at the European, national, and regional levels. It aims, through public-private partnerships, to mobilize the necessary resources

to build a "high-performance ecosystem" across the entire value chain, starting with research and innovation, and to create the right incentives for the accelerated deployment of AI-based solutions, including in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);

- ✓ the key elements of a future regulatory framework for AI in Europe that will create a unique "ecosystem of trust." [11].

In line with European values, fostering an environment of trust is viewed as a policy objective in its own right, aimed at addressing public concerns regarding the use of systems and applications based on artificial intelligence. At the same time, such an environment should provide the necessary legal predictability and certainty for businesses and public organizations when developing and implementing AI-based innovations. In this context, the European Commission consistently supports a human-centric approach to the development of artificial intelligence, in which technologies are oriented toward people, their rights, and their well-being. This approach is based on the principles for building trust in human-centric artificial intelligence and takes into account the practical experience gained and the recommendations formulated during the pilot implementation of the ethical guidelines developed by the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence.

From a governance and communication perspective, it is grounded in key ethical factors such as integrity, reliability, and competence, which form the foundation for its development and maintenance. In this regard, Linda Hon and James E. Grunig make a significant contribution by developing a framework for measuring the relationships between organizations and their publics. They define trust as a central component of high-quality relationships, alongside variables such as satisfaction, commitment, mutual control, and shared values [12].

According to their model, it consists of three main dimensions:

- ✓ integrity – the belief that the organization is honest and fair;
- ✓ reliability – the expectation that the organization will fulfill its commitments;
- ✓ competence – the perception that the organization possesses the capacity to achieve its stated goals [12].

On this basis, a synthetic definition can be proposed: trust represents a relational assessment made by a trustor of a trustee in a specific context of uncertainty, where vulnerability is accepted based on the expectation of competent, ethical, and socially responsible behavior.

The comparison below is based on key literature reviews related to studies, management, and experimental research [13]. In an organizational and institutional context, trust is best understood not as a singular relationship, but as a structured architecture of reliability that can be designed, signaled, assessed, and, when necessary, repaired. Contemporary management research coalesces around several key pillars that collectively shape institutional trust.

The first pillar is governance capacity, referring to the ability of institutions to effectively perform their functions. Empirical data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that perceptions of reliability, responsiveness, and evidence-based decision-making are strongly associated with higher levels of public trust [14]. This reflects the dimension of reliability related to effectiveness, where trust depends on demonstrated competence and capacity to deliver. The second pillar is ethical governance, which refers to integrity, impartiality, and the appropriate use of power. Trust is strengthened when institutions are perceived as resistant to corruption, subject to checks and balances, and committed to the legitimate use of power. OECD findings further indicate that expectations regarding data protection, the integrity of public officials, and institutional accountability are critical determinants of trust [14].

The third pillar is procedural justice and legitimacy. Research on procedural justice, particularly by Tom R. Tyler, shows that people are more likely to accept decisions and cooperate with authorities when processes are perceived as fair, transparent, and respectful [15].

This underscores that trust is driven not only by results, but also by the way decisions are made and communicated.

The fourth pillar is the quality of communication. Strategic communication contributes to trust when it is timely, consistent, transparent, and dialogic. Research on transparency and communication shows that providing clear and substantive information increases trust, including in technology-mediated environments, such as interactions supported by artificial intelligence. In this sense, communication is not merely reputational but is constitutive of institutional legitimacy.

The fifth pillar is stakeholder engagement and voice. Trust increases when stakeholders perceive meaningful opportunities for participation, responsiveness, and dialogue, rather than one-way communication. Engagement frameworks emphasize that trust is built through observable inclusion, reciprocity, and responsiveness in decision-making processes.

The sixth pillar is the accountability framework, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) and, increasingly, corporate digital responsibility (CDR). Recent research conceptualizes CDR as a set of shared values and norms guiding organizational behavior regarding digital technologies and data management, extending accountability into areas such as privacy, algorithmic accountability, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence [16].

In technology-mediated societies, trust is no longer limited to interpersonal or institutional relationships; it extends to interactions between people, technologies, and institutions. This transformation positions it as a key prerequisite for:

- ✓ the adoption of digital innovations;
- ✓ the legitimacy of artificial intelligence governance;
- ✓ the sustainability of technological systems.

In this way, trust becomes a connecting mechanism between technological complexity and societal sustainability, reinforcing its role as a key factor for sustainable development in the digital age.

An analysis of contemporary research in the fields of corporate social responsibility, the green transition, and human resource management highlights a number of

established best practices that support the sustainable development of organizations through expert management.

First, there is a clear integration of sustainability into strategic management, whereby environmental and social goals are incorporated into organizational policies and management processes [17], [18]. This approach is linked to the transition from traditional corporate social responsibility to ESG-oriented models and social entrepreneurship.

Second, green human resource management (Green HRM) plays an important role in promoting sustainable organizational behavior through employee training, motivation, and engagement [19].

Particular attention is given to the development of so-called *green-collar workers* as a key resource in the context of the green transition [20].

Third, digitalization and the development of a digital culture are increasingly viewed as a source of competitive advantage, supporting effective human capital management and organizational adaptability in a dynamic environment [21], [22]. Thus, digital competencies and technological literacy are emerging as critical factors for sustainability.

Fourth, organizational culture and leadership are identified as key mechanisms for implementing sustainable practices, with employee motivation and values-based management contributing to the development of long-term organizational commitment [23].

Fifth, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT) are having a significant impact on the tourism industry, transforming both the customer experience and business models. In this context, organizations are encouraged to embrace innovation strategically, invest in the development of digital competencies, and ensure the ethical and responsible use of technology. The future of tourism will depend not only on technological progress but also on the industry's capacity for flexible and sustainable adaptation [24].

Based on the analysis, the following applied trends can be identified within a technology- and sustainability-oriented trust-building framework:

- ✓ Integration of ESG principles into organizational strategies, with a focus on transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability;
- ✓ Development of green human resource management (Green HRM) practices aimed at promoting environmental awareness and pro-sustainability behavior among employees;
- ✓ Investment in digital culture and competencies as a prerequisite for adaptability and innovation;
- ✓ Promoting leadership based on values and trust that supports organizational sustainability;
- ✓ Developing communication strategies that address misinformation and strengthen public trust in transformation processes [25];
- ✓ Embracing information security as a strategic tool for building trust, as effective data protection mechanisms are directly linked to the perceived reliability and legitimacy of digital systems [26];
- ✓ Implementing responsible communication practices, widely emphasized in professional codes of ethics, as a foundational element of the organizational vision and as a key tool in the execution of strategic and tactical communication plans [27].

Best practices such as integrating sustainability into management, developing green human resources, and digital transformation demonstrate that organizational sustainability is not merely a technological or economic process, but rather a social one...

A deeply constructed phenomenon in which the connecting mechanism between strategies, people, and results is the sustainability of trust. This gives rise to integrated practices at multiple levels, where ethics, communication, and management function as interconnected mechanisms. At the macro level, this is reflected in institutional frameworks and societal processes that collectively build sustainable and reliable systems, while at the micro level it manifests itself through organizational policies and behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

In this complex and dynamic field of research, a variety of concepts and analytical approaches are emerging that must be integrated into a coherent and organic framework capable of serving as a guiding reference point between technological development, sustainability, and a human-centered approach aimed at higher levels of trust. In this sense, technologies cannot be understood solely as tools for efficiency, innovation, and economic growth. They require a social and human dimension grounded in ethics, responsibility, inclusion, and institutional trust.

In practice, the accelerated pace of technological progress often outpaces the capacity of states and institutions to establish adequate regulatory frameworks to protect citizens. This creates tension between innovation and regulation, between technological efficiency and social security, and between digital progress and human rights. The digital sphere is increasingly intertwined with real-world experiences, significantly shaping the way people perceive the world, build their life experiences, and assess their own capabilities.

A sense of security, both in the present and regarding future prospects, is directly dependent on how technologies are managed, communicated, and regulated. In this context, a number of critical challenges arise, particularly regarding the blurred lines between voluntary participation and hidden coercion in digital environments. Practices that are formally based on user consent often raise questions about the extent to which that consent is truly informed and freely given, thereby creating conditions for what might be described as a "moral appropriation" of rights, even in the absence of explicit legal violations.

This, in turn, generates new dimensions of mistrust that extend beyond concerns about data security and encompass issues related to individual autonomy, dignity, and freedom.

At the same time, the influence of global technology players is growing, concentrating significant power within the digital ecosystem. In this environment, the need for greater transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility is becoming increasingly pronounced, with users no longer merely passive objects of technological processes but active participants and, to some extent, co-creators in their development.

The role of regulation is also being rethought, highlighting the need for multi-layered governance in which not only governments but also organizations, civil society, and consumers themselves act as arbiters and guarantors of trust. In this sense, if the logic of coercion replaces the logic of trust in everyday digital life, the risks extend beyond technological or economic consequences. Fundamental values such as human dignity, freedom, and social cohesion are at stake.

For this reason, the contemporary debate on technological and digital transformation must move beyond the narrow framework of economic efficiency and refocus on human well-being and social development as pathways to sustainability.

In summary, trust in technology can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing competence, benevolence, integrity, transparency, predictability, and security. It is precisely the integration of these elements, supported by effective approaches and best practices, that enables technology to fulfill its primary function: improving the quality of human life without generating additional uncertainty or social tension.

Furthermore, the "human-centered" paradigm is closely linked to the concept of Society 5.0, which envisions an integrated system in which the digital, physical, and social spheres converge in a balanced and inclusive manner [28]. Within this framework, sustainable development cannot be achieved solely through technological progress but requires a holistic approach that combines innovative technological solutions with robust strategic and regulatory frameworks, as well as strong cross-sectoral partnerships.

The transition to sustainability, initiated by the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has already generated visible impacts across all sectors and in most social and economic spheres of human life [20]. These transformations further reinforce the need to align technological progress with public expectations, ethical principles, and long-term sustainability goals.

In this context, the concept of "trust" emerges as a critical integrative mechanism that enables the effective coordination of technological innovations, governance structures, and social systems, thereby supporting the transition to a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient Society 5.0.

Finally, it should be noted that the arguments presented are not devoid of the author's perspective, reflecting an interpretive approach to the issue at hand. This stance, however, is explicitly acknowledged and is intended to stimulate critical academic debate regarding the role of trust as a central mediator between technological progress and sustainable development.

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