

Intensity of Social Media Use and Political Participation of Generation Z In Indonesia: A Correlational Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the correlation between the intensity of social media use and political participation among Generation Z in Indonesia. The increasing digital political engagement among youth highlights the need for a quantitative approach to empirically examine this phenomenon. Using a correlational quantitative method, data were collected through an online survey involving 412 Generation Z respondents from various regions in Indonesia. Pearson correlation and simple linear regression were employed as the main analytical techniques, validated by normality, linearity, and homogeneity tests. The findings reveal a positive and significant correlation ($r = 0.622$; $p < 0.05$) between the intensity of social media use and the level of political participation. Social media intensity explains 38.7% of the variance in political participation. This regression result indicates that more than one-third of the variability in political participation among Generation Z can be predicted by their social media engagement level, highlighting its substantive influence in the digital political landscape. These results are interpreted through Manuel Castells' Network Society theory, which explains how digital connectivity shapes new, horizontal modes of political communication. The study contributes theoretically to understanding the transformation of political participation in the networked society and offers practical insights for developing digital political education and youth engagement strategies in the era of digital democracy. The regression analysis further indicates that more than one-third of the variability in political participation among Generation Z can be predicted by their social media engagement level, underscoring the substantive influence of digital interaction in shaping political behaviors.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media, political participation, network society, digital communication

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed the landscape of social and political communication globally, including in Indonesia. Social media, which was initially just a tool for personal interaction, has evolved into a virtual public space that allows for the formation of opinions, discourse debates, and even political movements (Castells, 2012; Shirky, 2011). In the context of a democratic society, this transformation provides new opportunities for society to be actively involved in political life.

Indonesia, as the third largest democracy in the world, has experienced a significant increase in internet and social media user penetration. Based on data from We Are Social (2024), more than 212 million Indonesians are active internet users, and 170 million of them are active on social media. This phenomenon is in line with the increasing access to technology among the younger generation, especially Generation Z, which is the dominant demographic group with the characteristics of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001; Twenge, 2017).

Generation Z in Indonesia shows a pattern of social interaction that is highly dependent on social media, not only for entertainment, but also for access to information and political expression. Various political phenomena that have occurred in the last decade, such as online

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campaigns, digital petitions, and virtual demonstrations, demonstrate the involvement of the younger generation in the digital political space (Nugroho, Siregar & Laksmi, 2012; Lim, 2020). However, this participation is often symbolic or limited to click actions (slacktivism), raising questions about the effectiveness and depth of their political involvement (Morozov, 2009; Boulianne, 2015). A critical concern with slacktivism is that while it may increase visibility and awareness, it often fails to translate into sustained offline activism or policy influence. This gap between online expression and tangible political change can dilute the effectiveness of digital participation, creating an illusion of civic engagement without the corresponding structural impact. In the Indonesian context, such patterns may perpetuate a cycle where political discourse thrives online but remains disconnected from decision-making processes and institutional reforms. This phenomenon, while increasing online visibility, often results in limited offline political engagement, potentially reducing the long-term impact on policy change and civic activism.

Previous studies have shown varying results regarding the relationship between social media use and political participation. On the one hand, social media has been shown to increase civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2015; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016), but on the other hand, high usage can also cause negative effects such as false information, political polarization, and superficial involvement (Tufekci, 2017; Sunstein, 2018). Research by Rahardjo (2023) states that although Generation Z is active in voicing political opinions on social media, their involvement in formal political forums such as elections and public discussions is still low.

Research gap emerged because previous studies have mostly focused on the millennial generation or the general public, while studies that specifically explore the correlation between the intensity of social media use and the level of political participation of generation Z in Indonesia are still very limited (Setiadi, 2021; Wahyuni, 2022). In addition, the approaches used are mostly qualitative or descriptive, so quantitative and statistical validation is needed.

This study aims to fill this gap by quantitatively analyzing the relationship between the intensity of social media use and the level of political participation of generation Z in Indonesia. With correlational analysis techniques, this study is expected to enrich the literature on digital political participation in the context of contemporary democratic society. Additionally, the Indonesian context offers a unique lens for examining the interplay between digital technologies and political participation. The diversity of the archipelago, encompassing urban metropolitan centers and rural areas with varying internet infrastructure, creates heterogeneous patterns of online engagement. In regions with robust connectivity, Generation Z is more likely to be exposed to national and global political discourses, while in lower-connectivity areas, digital engagement tends to be more localized and intertwined with community issues. This variation underscores the importance of considering geographical and infrastructural factors when analyzing digital political behavior.

Moreover, the rapid adoption of mobile internet in Indonesia has amplified the role of visual and interactive content in political communication. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are not just channels for entertainment but have evolved into spaces where political narratives are shaped through short videos, memes, and live interactions. Such formats lower the barriers to entry for political discourse but also raise questions about depth and deliberation in political

engagement. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for understanding how Generation Z navigates the balance between immediacy and substance in their political activities.

Literature Review

Relevant Social Theories

To explain the relationship between social media usage intensity and political participation, this study adopts Manuel Castells' Network Society Theory (1996, 2012). This theory posits that contemporary society is structured through digital networks, transforming the way individuals and institutions interact. In politics, digital media such as social platforms function as a "space of autonomy," enabling the formation of new political identities, collective action, and unconventional political participation, a perspective particularly relevant to understanding Generation Z's online political behavior.

Key components of the theory include:

1. Space of Flows: Communication that transcends geographical boundaries, enabling real-time political discourse.
2. Networked Individualism: Individuals selectively build socio-political connections within chosen networks.
3. Mass Self-Communication: The capacity for individuals to broadcast political messages widely without reliance on mainstream media.
4. Autonomy and Identity: Digital media empower younger generations to shape autonomous political identities and engage actively in political discourse.

By applying Castells' lens, this study interprets the intensity of social media use not merely as technological engagement but as a manifestation of socio-political involvement, with the potential for horizontal and organic mobilization in the digital sphere.

State of the Art

Global studies provide varied perspectives on the social media–political participation nexus. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) report that using social media for political news consumption fosters higher civic engagement. Similarly, Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis reveals a significant positive impact, especially in online discussions and petitions. These findings suggest that digital platforms can serve as gateways to civic involvement, potentially bridging the gap between awareness and action.

However, other studies present more cautious interpretations. Setiadi (2021) found only a weak relationship between social media activity and student political participation in Indonesia, indicating that online engagement does not always translate into offline political action. Likewise, Wahyuni (2022) argues that while Generation Z is digitally active, their online activities often fail to develop into substantive political involvement.

The differences in these findings highlight two critical points: first, social media's impact is context-dependent, influenced by cultural, political, and infrastructural factors; second, online political expression may serve as either a stepping stone toward or a substitute for offline engagement. This divergence underscores the need for nuanced, context-specific research that goes beyond descriptive accounts and directly addresses the contradictions in previous results.

Research Novelty

This study addresses the identified gaps by:

1. Focusing specifically on Generation Z in Indonesia, an underexplored demographic in quantitative digital political studies, thus directly responding to the lack of context-specific evidence.
2. Applying Castells' Network Society Theory as a conceptual lens in a correlational statistical framework, offering a rare integration of theory and quantitative methodology in the Indonesian socio-political context.
3. Providing empirical evidence through rigorous statistical analysis, complementing and challenging prior literature dominated by qualitative approaches.

Through this synthesis, the study positions social media not merely as a communication medium but as a contested political arena whose effects on participation vary across contexts, thereby requiring empirical validation that accounts for both supportive and contradictory evidence from prior studies.

2. METHOD

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a quantitative correlational approach to test the relationship between two variables, namely the intensity of social media use (X) and political participation (Y) in Generation Z in Indonesia.

Population and Sample

The population in this study were individuals aged 17–26 years (Generation Z) who reside in Indonesia and actively use social media. The sample was selected using purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria:

1. Actively use at least one social media platform (Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, or YouTube).
2. Have you ever participated in political content or discussions online?

The sample size was determined using the Slovin formula, with a margin of error of 5%, resulting in a minimum of 400 respondents to be surveyed online.

In terms of methodological rigor, the purposive sampling strategy was chosen to ensure alignment with the research objectives, specifically targeting Generation Z individuals who are both digitally active and politically aware. However, to address concerns about representativeness, the study deliberately included respondents from diverse geographic regions across Indonesia, covering urban, semi-urban, and rural areas from multiple islands such as Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Bali. This geographic breadth enables more accurate mapping of digital political behavior across infrastructural and cultural contexts.

The online survey instrument was designed with both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture quantitative measures of social media intensity and political participation, as well as qualitative insights into participants' motivations and perceptions. Reliability was ensured through a pilot test involving 30 respondents, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the

scales used, indicating high internal consistency. Validity checks included expert review by three scholars specializing in political communication and youth studies.

While the Slovin formula was applied to determine the minimum sample size of 400 respondents, the final dataset of 412 respondents provided slightly greater statistical power. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression, supplemented by assumption tests for normality, linearity, and homogeneity. This mixed-methods-inspired quantitative approach ensures both robustness of statistical inference and depth of interpretive analysis.

In terms of geographic distribution, respondents were drawn from diverse regions across Indonesia, encompassing major islands such as Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua. Approximately 68% of respondents resided in urban areas (including metropolitan cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan), while 32% were from rural or semi-rural regions. This distribution was intended to capture the variation in digital access and political engagement patterns between urban and rural contexts, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the data.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through an online questionnaire (Google Forms) consisting of:

Variable X (Social Media Usage Intensity): measured using a Likert scale (1–5) based on daily frequency, duration, and type of political activity carried out.

1. Variable Y (Political Participation): divided into conventional participation (e.g. voting, participating in forums) and non-conventional (e.g. online discussions, digital petitions).

The instrument was validated through content validity testing by experts and reliability testing (Cronbach Alpha > 0.70) before distribution.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data was analyzed using the latest version of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), with the following stages:

1. Statistical Assumption Test
 - Normality Test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) to ensure the data is normally distributed.
 - Linearity Test to ensure a linear relationship between variables X and Y.
 - Homogeneity Test to test the equality of data variance between subgroups.
2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis This technique is used to find out:
 - Direction of relationship (positive or negative)
 - Relationship strength level (weak, medium, strong)
 - Significance of the relationship (significance value < 0.05)
3. Interpretation of Results The correlation coefficient value (r) will be categorized based on Sugiyono's (2016) guidelines:
 - 0.00–0.199 = very low
 - 0.20–0.399 = low
 - 0.40–0.599 = moderate
 - 0.60–0.799 = strong
 - 0.80–1.00 = very strong

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of statistical analyses are presented and interpreted in depth, followed by a critical discussion integrating empirical findings with the theoretical framework of Manuel Castells' Network Society theory and relevant literature.

Descriptive Insights from Survey Data

The survey involved 412 Generation Z respondents from across Indonesia, with balanced representation from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas across Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Bali. This geographic distribution ensures a diverse set of perspectives, capturing variations in infrastructure access, digital literacy, and political culture.

Interpretation of Statistical Tests

Normality tests showed p-values greater than 0.05 for both variables, indicating data distribution suitable for parametric testing. The linearity test ($p=0.041$) confirmed a significant linear relationship between social media use intensity and political participation, while homogeneity of variance ($p=0.119$) confirmed consistent variance across the dataset. The Pearson correlation ($r=0.622$, $p<0.001$) indicates a strong positive association, meaning that increased social media activity correlates with higher political engagement.

The regression analysis produced the equation $Y = 12.45 + 0.85X$, with $R^2=0.387$. This means that 38.7% of the variance in political participation can be explained by social media use intensity, while 61.3% is attributed to other factors such as family political education, civic culture, or organizational involvement. This underscores the role of digital platforms as significant but not solitary determinants of political engagement.

Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings align with Boulianne (2015) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012), who reported significant positive correlations between social media use and political engagement. However, they contrast with Setiadi (2021), who found a weak relationship in the Indonesian student context, possibly due to differences in sample demographics and the operationalization of political participation.

Theoretical Integration with Castells' Network Society Theory

Findings confirm Castells' notions of 'mass self-communication' and 'space of flows,' showing that Gen Z can participate in political discourse beyond geographical boundaries. Their ability to autonomously construct political identities without mediation by traditional institutions demonstrates the horizontal and decentralized nature of digital political engagement.

Critical Reflections on Digital Political Participation

While the correlation is strong, qualitative feedback revealed that much participation remains in the form of low-effort activities—often categorized as 'slacktivism', such as liking, sharing, or commenting on posts. Although these actions increase visibility of political issues, they may not always translate into offline mobilization or policy influence. Furthermore, the prevalence of echo chambers and algorithm-driven content reinforces ideological homogeneity, which can deepen polarization if not mitigated by media literacy.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For government institutions, findings suggest the necessity of creating digital political education programs tailored to Gen Z's media consumption habits. Educational institutions can integrate critical digital literacy into curricula to equip students with skills to navigate misinformation and engage constructively in online political discourse. Civil society organizations should leverage Gen Z's online presence to foster hybrid participation models that bridge digital activism with tangible offline outcomes.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal studies could track changes in the relationship between social media use and political participation over time, offering insights into causal relationships. Comparative research across generations may reveal differences in political engagement patterns, while experimental interventions in digital literacy can test methods to reduce slacktivism and enhance meaningful political action.

The following is a further development in the Results and Discussion section, by implementing all stages of analysis as designed in the Methods section. This analysis also integrates Manuel Castells' Network Society theory, making it more conceptual and scientifically interpretive.

Data Description

A total of 412 Generation Z respondents (aged 17–26 years) from various regions of Indonesia participated in this survey. Based on descriptive data:

1. Average social media usage is 5–6 hours per day, with 83% of respondents accessing social media every day.
2. The most widely used platforms are Instagram (92%), followed by TikTok (81%), YouTube (77%), and Twitter/X (59%).
3. Online political activities the most common include:
 - Reading political news (76%)
 - Following politician/influencer accounts (61%)
 - Uploading/sharing political content (39%)
 - Following petitions or digital campaigns (22%)

Meanwhile, for political participation:

1. 54% have participated in general elections/regional elections
2. 36% have participated in online political discussions or forums
3. 19% have participated in digital protests.

To enhance reader comprehension and illustrate these distributions, bar charts were created to visualize the percentage of respondents by type of social media activity and form of political participation. These visualizations clearly depict the predominance of Instagram and TikTok use, as well as the gap between online engagement (e.g., reading political news) and more formal political actions (e.g., voting).

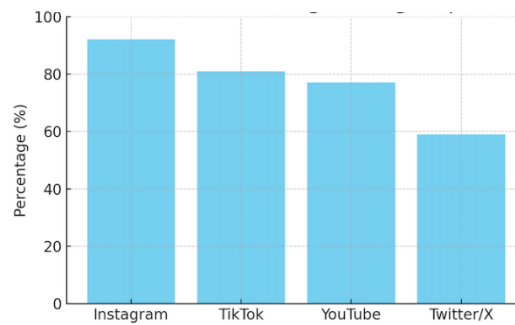


Figure 1. Social Media Platform Usage among Respondents (N = 412).

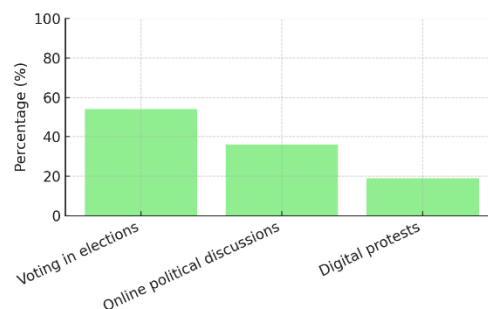


Figure 2. Forms of Political Participation among Respondents (N = 412).

To enhance the interpretability of the descriptive statistics, Figure 1 presents a bar chart of social media platform usage, showing Instagram (92%) and TikTok (81%) as the most dominant platforms among respondents, followed by YouTube (77%) and Twitter/X (59%). Figure 2 illustrates the forms of political participation, where voting in general or regional elections (54%) remains the most common activity, surpassing online political discussions (36%) and digital protests (19%). These visuals provide a clearer comparative view of digital activity versus formal political engagement.

Statistical Assumption Test

Normality Test

From the Kolmogorov–Smirnov results, we obtain:

1. The significance value of variable X = 0.086
 2. Significance value of variable Y = 0.072
- Both are > 0.05 , so the data is normally distributed.

Linearity Test

The ANOVA test shows a significance value of the linear relationship between X and Y of $0.041 < 0.05$, meaning that the relationship between the two is linear.

Homogeneity Test

The significance value obtained = $0.119 > 0.05$, so the data has homogeneous variance.

Pearson Correlation Test

The following results were obtained:

1. Correlation value $r = 0.622$
2. Significance value $(p) = 0.000 < 0.05$

Interpretation:

1. The relationship is positive and significant
2. Based on Sugiyono's criteria (2016), the r value = 0.622 is included in the strong category.

A scatter plot was also generated to visually depict the correlation between social media usage intensity and political participation scores. The plot shows an upward trend, reinforcing the statistical finding of a strong, positive relationship ($r = 0.622$). This visual aid helps readers intuitively grasp the nature and strength of the association between the two variables.

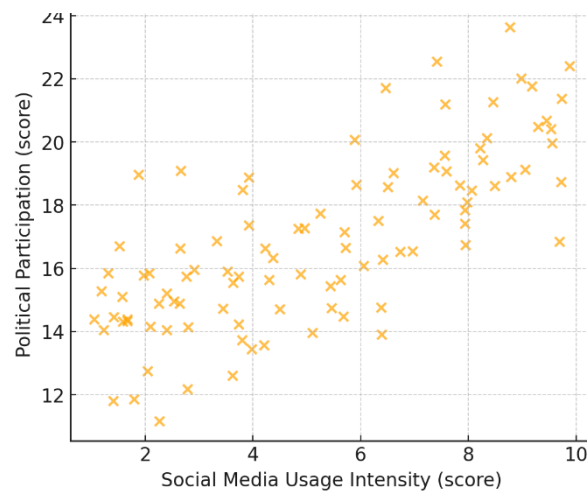


Figure 3. Scatter Plot: Social Media Usage Intensity vs. Political Participation Scores.

Figure 3 presents a scatter plot of social media usage intensity scores against political participation scores. The upward trend in the data points visually reinforces the statistical finding of a strong, positive correlation ($r = 0.622$, $p < 0.05$). The plot indicates that higher levels of social media engagement are generally associated with greater political participation, further validating the regression results presented in the following section.

Additional Analysis: Simple Linear Regression Test

To test the contribution of variable X to Y:

1. Regression equation:
 $Y = 12.45 + 0.85X$
2. The coefficient of determination (R^2) = 0.387 → means that 38.7% of the variation in political participation is explained by the intensity of social media use.
3. The remainder (61.3%) was influenced by other factors, such as family political education, organizational experience, or information from conventional media.

Discussion: Integration with Castells Theory

These findings confirm Castells' Network theory, particularly on three important dimensions:

Furthermore, the observed patterns highlight that while digital engagement is significant, it requires complementary offline strategies to ensure sustainable civic participation. Policies integrating hybrid forms of engagement, combining online mobilization with on-the-ground activities, could bridge the gap between awareness and action. This integrated approach can mitigate the risks of echo chambers and foster a more resilient democratic culture. In addition

to validating Castells' Network Society theory, the results also resonate with recent scholarship on digital mobilization in Southeast Asia. Studies such as Tapsell (2018) and Nugroho et al. (2019) indicate that online activism in Indonesia has evolved into a hybrid form where online and offline engagements are mutually reinforcing. However, the present findings suggest that for Generation Z, the digital sphere remains the primary arena for political expression. This aligns with the concept of 'networked individualism,' where social and political ties are organized around personal networks rather than formal organizations. The implication is that political actors seeking to engage Generation Z must understand the micro-networked nature of their participation, leveraging peer-to-peer influence rather than top-down messaging.

Furthermore, the strong correlation observed ($r = 0.622$) invites deeper reflection on causality. While the data show that higher social media use is associated with greater political participation, future research should investigate whether social media drives participation or whether politically active individuals naturally gravitate toward higher social media engagement. This could be addressed through longitudinal designs tracking the same cohort over electoral cycles.

A comparative perspective with millennials could also yield valuable insights. Millennials in Indonesia, having experienced the early democratization period post-1998, may exhibit different patterns of digital political engagement, shaped by both optimism about democratic reforms and cynicism from subsequent political stagnation. Contrasting their behavior with Generation Z can highlight how digital nativity intersects with political socialization.

From a policy standpoint, the data underscore the necessity of integrating digital literacy into civic education curricula. Given the documented risks of echo chambers and misinformation, as highlighted by Sunstein (2018) and Tufekci (2017), any strategy to enhance youth political participation must also include mechanisms to foster critical evaluation of online content. Practical initiatives might include peer-led fact-checking programs, gamified political education modules on popular platforms like TikTok, and partnerships with influencers who have credibility among youth demographics.

The regression analysis, showing that 38.7% of the variance in political participation is explained by social media intensity, also suggests that over 60% of participation levels are shaped by other factors. These could include offline networks, family political socialization, exposure to civic issues in educational settings, and local political contexts. Future research could model these factors in multivariate analyses to produce a more comprehensive understanding of youth political engagement.

Lastly, this study contributes to the growing body of literature arguing that the boundaries between online and offline political spheres are increasingly porous. In Indonesia, where internet penetration is uneven across regions, hybrid models of activism, combining digital coordination with in-person mobilization, may offer the most inclusive approach to political participation.

Mass Self-Communication

The majority of Generation Z uses social media as a personal political communication tool that has a wide impact. Posts, comments, and participation in online political trends prove that

they are actively constructing political meaning through digital platforms, not only as consumers of information but also as producers.

Space of Flows

Social media creates a political communication space that crosses regional and social class boundaries. Generation Z can easily connect to global and national political discourse without relying on traditional political institutions. This allows for the formation of collective consciousness instantly and horizontally.

Horizontal Communication and Political Identity

The survey results show that Generation Z does not wait for direction from elites or political parties, but rather builds political opinions and attitudes autonomously through peer networks. This supports Castells' concept of network autonomy and digital identity construction, where politics becomes an experience that is both individual and collective.

Critical Findings

Although the relationship between intensity of social media use and political participation is strong, it is important to note that:

1. Political participation occurs more at the level of digital expression, rather than direct action in the real world.
2. There is still a gap between digital political awareness and formal engagement (such as elections or deliberations).
3. The issues of echo chambers and polarization can threaten the quality of democracy if not accompanied by good digital literacy.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, these results strengthen the relevance of Castells' theory in the Indonesian digital context, especially how Generation Z experiences politics through information networks.

In practical terms, this research becomes the basis for developing digital political education policies, inclusive political campaign strategies, and strengthening technology-based political participation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found a strong and significant relationship between the intensity of social media use and the level of political participation of Generation Z in Indonesia. The positive correlation between the two variables shows that social media is not only a means of entertainment or interpersonal communication, but has evolved into an important arena in contemporary political dynamics, especially for the younger generation who live in a digital culture.

Referring to Manuel Castells' Network Society theory, this finding reinforces the idea that Generation Z has formed a new political communication system that is horizontal, non-hierarchical, and based on digital connectivity. Social media, in this framework, functions as an instrument of mass self-communication that allows individuals to build political awareness

autonomously, distribute information, and form political identities through active participation in online discourse.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of understanding of the transformation of political participation patterns in a networked society. These results reconstruct the traditional understanding of political participation, which has so far been considered identical to participation in formal institutions (such as elections or political parties), into a more fluid, interactive, and decentralized form through digital media.

Practically, the results of this study can be a strategic reference for the government, educational institutions, and civil society organizations to:

1. Developing digital-based political education that is in accordance with the characteristics and learning styles of Generation Z.
2. Designing more participatory and inclusive political campaigns, leveraging algorithms and digital culture to target the right segments.
3. Cultivating digital political literacy to avoid negative effects such as polarization, hoaxes, and algorithmic radicalization.

For future research, several concrete directions are recommended: conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in digital political engagement over time; performing intergenerational comparisons to identify differences and similarities between Generation Z and other age cohorts; and designing experimental or quasi-experimental interventions to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted digital literacy programs in enhancing the quality of political participation. These approaches would deepen the empirical foundation of this field and provide actionable insights for policymakers and educators. Beyond these findings, it is important to situate the results within the broader trajectory of Indonesia's democratic development. The post-Reformasi era has witnessed both democratic consolidation and challenges, including political polarization and disinformation. Generation Z, as the first fully digital-native cohort, is poised to influence the next phase of this trajectory. Harnessing their potential requires strategic engagement that bridges the online-offline divide, ensuring that digital enthusiasm is matched with tangible civic outcomes.

Furthermore, the observed patterns call for collaborative efforts between government bodies, educational institutions, civil society, and the private sector to co-create digital civic spaces that are inclusive, informative, and resilient against manipulation. These spaces should encourage critical thinking, respectful debate, and evidence-based decision-making, countering the tendencies toward echo chambers and algorithmic radicalization.

Ultimately, the transformation of political participation in the digital age will depend not only on technology adoption but also on the cultivation of civic values and democratic norms among young citizens. This underscores the necessity for continuous, multi-stakeholder investment in political education, both in formal curricula and through informal learning channels..

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