

Generation Z's Perception of Political Memes in the Context of Digital Media Literacy Education

Fitra Hadi Khaz¹, Gessya Aprilia Syahrika Putri², Nabilla Maharani³, Salsabila Rahmayanti⁴,
Riski Hariadi Utomo⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Lancang Kuning College of Administrative Sciences (STIA) Dumai, Indonesia;
fitrahadikhaz@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Rapid technological developments have made human life much more practical and easier. One such technology is social media. Political memes are increasingly dominant on social media and have become a tool for the rapid and easily accepted dissemination of political messages. The purpose of this study is to examine how Generation Z views political memes as a propaganda instrument in the 2024 General Election. This study used a literature review method with both a literature review and content analysis. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and interpretively by integrating Robert M. Entman's framing theory and Chong and Druckman's framing theory. The findings indicate that Gen Z views political memes as an engaging and creative communication medium but are also aware of the risks of information manipulation within them. Political memes are considered effective in increasing political attention and engagement, but their impact depends on an individual's level of digital literacy.

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Corresponding Author:

Fitra Hadi Khaz
Lancang Kuning College of Administrative Sciences (STIA) Dumai, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

As time goes by, technology evolves, and so does it, influencing human life. Rapid technological advancements have made life much more practical and easier. One such technology that has evolved is social media. Social media is part of technological developments that enable users to create, receive, and disseminate information quickly. Social media, especially Instagram, is widely used by Gen Z to obtain various information, including political information (Muhamad, 2023, Prihantoro et al., 2024).

Gen Z is a generation consisting of individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who have characteristics such as excellent technology and communication skills (Ardian Lukman et al., 2024). Indonesia is currently enjoying a demographic bonus, with 70.72% of its population in the productive age group (15–64 years). This presents a significant opportunity for Indonesia to reach its golden age by 2045, provided the potential of this productive age group can be properly utilized. Among this productive age group, Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is the largest generation in Indonesia, comprising 27.94% of the total population, or approximately 74.93 million people. This number is even larger than the Millennial

Generation, which is the second-largest group at 25.87% of the total population, or approximately 69.38 million people (Understanding and Uncovering the Behavior, Challenges, and Opportunities, tt)

Social media has the potential to influence Gen Z's perspective on the 2024 presidential election through various methods, one of which is through social media platforms. Memes are visual representations of social phenomena packaged in the form of videos, images, or text. Political memes refer to memes that address societal interests or conflicts, political actors, representative actions, or political decisions (Johann & Bülow, 2019); Prihantoro et al., 2024).

The following problems were identified: First, exposure to memes influences political attitudes. Repeated exposure to memes can shape attitudes or reinforce political preferences in young voters (first-time voters/Gen Z), especially if the information is low-quality or satirical or simplistic. Quantitative research indicates an influence of exposure to political memes on the attitudes of first-time voters in Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek); (Prihantoro et al., 2024)

Second, misinformation and disinformation are disguised through humor. Memes often present simplified or distorted information in a humorous format, making false claims easier to accept or spread because they're "too funny to verify." This increases the risk of misperceptions about candidates or issues (Prihantoro et al., 2024).

Third, echo chambers/polarization. Social media algorithms tend to display content that aligns with user preferences. Gen Z, who consume political memes in a homogenous environment, will have increasingly polarized perceptions. Case studies of the 2024 election show that memes reinforce certain discourses in the digital public sphere (Prihantoro et al., 2024).

The 2024 general election marked the first time that elections were held simultaneously in Indonesia. This novelty has attracted public attention, particularly among Gen Z, where information is quickly accessed through social media, particularly Instagram, a platform for surfing political memes and can influence individuals' perspectives on candidates.

In this study, we will discuss how Gen Z perceives memes circulating on the social media platform "Instagram" regarding participation in the 2024 election. This will describe how Gen Z reacts to political memes on the "Instagram" platform. The purpose of this study is to examine how Generation Z views political memes as a propaganda instrument in the 2024 General Election.

2. METHOD

This study uses a literature study method by reviewing various relevant literature to obtain a theoretical basis regarding political memes and the political behavior of Generation Z. This study uses a qualitative method with a library research approach to examine political memes as a form of digital political communication and their relationship to the political behavior of Generation Z. Data were obtained through a review of scientific literature in the form of national and international journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports relevant to the topics of political memes, social media, and political participation of the younger generation (Creswell, 2014). Data analysis was conducted descriptively and interpretively by integrating Robert M. Entman's framing theory and Chong and Druckman's framing theory. Entman's theory was used to identify how political memes frame reality through four framing functions: problem definition, cause determination, moral judgment, and solution recommendation (Entman, 1993).

Meanwhile, Chong & Druckman, (2007) is used to explain the mechanism of how the framing has the potential to influence the political attitudes and opinions of the audience, especially Generation Z. In addition, this study uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach to analyze the meaning of signs in political memes. Through the classification of icons, indexes, and symbols, semiotic analysis helps explain how visual and text elements in memes construct political meanings that are simple, persuasive, and easily understood by Generation Z on social media (Peirce, 1934).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the majority of Gen Z are familiar with and consume political memes through social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and X. They consider political memes as a form of information that is lighter, quicker to understand, and easier to share than formal political news. However, their level of trust in political memes still varies. Some respondents see political memes as entertainment and are not always taken seriously. However, others feel that memes can influence political views, especially when packaged humorously but contain a strong message. This indicates that memes function as an effective propaganda tool, although not always recognized by Gen Z. This pattern is in accordance with Entman's Theory which has four main sub-indicators that correspond to the analysis of political memes (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Problem Definition

In the context of the 2024 Election, political memes circulating on social media consistently frame political issues in a very simple yet effective way to influence Gen Z's perceptions. The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) noted that Gen Z is the largest group in Indonesia's population structure, reaching 27.94% or 74.93 million people, which makes them the main target of digital-based political content. (Andriyanto & Fadilla, 2024)

Due to the high intensity of social media usage, especially TikTok and Instagram, which according to a report by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) have been the most widely used platforms for political consumption since 2023, memes have become a popular medium for presenting political issues in a light, humorous, and easily digestible manner. Memes often define political issues such as rising prices, official scandals, or candidate quality in short, emotionally evocative visuals. As a result, many Gen Zers understand politics through simplified frames, rather than in-depth explanations, so their perceptions are influenced by how the memes portray specific issues.

In Reportal Data, Scale of internet & social media users (Indonesia, early 2024): Indonesia had approximately 185.3 million internet users and 139.0 million social media users in early 2024. These figures demonstrate the enormous potential reach of political content (including memes) on digital platforms. Memes typically have a distinctive, repetitive format that can be modified by their users. They often use language used by young people, jokes, or current popular culture. Memes can function as a means of communication and expression within online communities, and they can also be used to convey messages in a simple and entertaining way. Memes can also be part of a viral phenomenon, where they spread quickly through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others. Memes also change rapidly along with cultural developments over time, meaning that in the future, the understanding of memes may change, because memes will always follow wherever they are. In the rapidly developing digital era, social media has become an important platform for society. Even now, fewer and fewer people want to watch television, and they prefer to watch news or certain events, they will prefer to watch them through available digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. Instagram, a popular platform for posting videos and photos, has become a platform for users to upload and interact with a variety of content, including political memes. Political memes have emerged as an effective communication tool for conveying political messages and voicing opinions from certain groups. However, these memes can sometimes be misused by users to insult, criticize, and create false rumors, leading Gen Z to develop their own perceptions of politics.



Figure 1: Screenshot of an Instagram account and comments from the public

The image is a political meme that combines the anime characters Naruto/Boruto with Indonesian political figures, namely, Prabowo Subianto, Gibran Rakabuming Raka and Joko Widodo. At the top, three main characters from the Naruto world are visible, all three are important figures depicted as powerful families or influential clans in the anime world. The bottom shows three real-life political figures, these three figures are key figures in the 2024 Election, especially the Prabowo-Gibran pair, with Jokowi as a political figure who is very well known to the public. This meme was created as a form of political humor by likening these Indonesian figures to a "clan" or powerful group like the elite ninjas in Naruto. The intended meaning of the meme is, the closeness or political relationship of this meme implies that the three are in the same circle of power, like an extended family or "ninja clan". Second, Gibran as the main character supported by two big figures Gibran's position in the middle shows that he is considered a figure who is "pushed" or "protected" by two big figures: Jokowi and Prabowo similar to Boruto who is between his father (Naruto) and his strong teacher (Sasuke). Third, the use of anime to attract the interest of Gen Z, memes like this are often used for light propaganda and the dissemination of political messages humorously to young voters, especially Gen Z who are familiar with pop culture, anime, and memes. And finally humor and entertainment, the main purpose of this meme is to entertain, not for serious political analysis. However, it still carries a hidden political message.

Based on the analysis's findings, political memes on social media play a significant role in shaping Gen Z's political perceptions in the 2024 elections. Memes simplify complex political issues into humorous and easily understood visual forms, thereby more quickly capturing the attention of the younger generation active on digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The use of popular culture, such as anime, makes political messages feel close and relevant, but at the same time frames political reality through symbols and analogies that can obscure deeper understanding. Although packaged as entertainment, memes still carry implicit political messages that have the potential to influence opinion, even giving rise to bias or distorted information. Thus, political memes function not only as a means of entertainment but also as an effective political communication tool in influencing how Gen Z interprets political issues and actors.

Causal Interpretation

Social media can also enable the formation of a community, due to the broad and fast character of interaction and interconnection, creating groups or communities that have the same views in public discussions, such as by using *hashtag* in expressing opinions. Virtual space is mediated and consists of images in the form of pictures, writings and videos. This virtual space has no boundaries so that it can give rise to the possibility of an ideal public discussion, namely the principle of equality of every citizen in expressing opinions or being directly involved in a public discussion, so virtual space is a place "that is nowhere" that functions through computer devices connected to a network or internet, then from virtual public space is a space that exists in cyberspace, which is mediated by technology connected to

the internet network can function as a virtual public space that can share messages in social media such as text, images to videos that have various forms, one of which is memes. (Suhantoro & Sufyanto, 2024).



Figure 2: Screenshot of an Instagram account and comments from the public

At the next level, political memes not only present a problem but also provide interpretations of who is considered to be the cause. A 2023 study by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) showed that 68% of the political information consumed by Gen Z comes from social media, where memes play a significant role in shaping opinion. (Namira et al., 2024)

Thus, when memes portray a particular candidate as the cause of high food prices or accuse a particular faction of incompetence in governing, these narratives quickly spread and are accepted as plausible causal explanations by a large number of young users. These causal interpretations often lack context, but due to the concise and humorous nature of memes, Gen Z tends to accept these simplifications as valid narratives. Thus, memes have significant framing power in determining which political figures are considered responsible for a particular issue in the eyes of young voters.

Memes on social media serve as a communication medium that not only represents an issue but also constructs causal interpretations of social and political events. Through a combination of visuals, concise text, and humor, memes simplify complex realities into easily understood causal narratives. In this context, memes often position specific individuals, groups, or institutions as the primary cause of a problem, such as failed public policies, economic crises, or public dissatisfaction.

For Generation Z, who are dominant users of social media, memes are a crucial resource for understanding political and social issues. Interpretations of causes constructed through memes tend to be quick, emotional, and lacking context, fostering the perception that a problem has a single, clear cause. As a result, the actors depicted in memes are often assumed to be directly responsible, even though the actual reality is more complex and involves many factors.

Thus, memes have significant framing power in shaping cause-and-effect understanding in virtual public spaces. This power can influence public opinion, particularly among Gen Z, in determining attitudes, judgments, and preferences toward certain issues or figures.

Moral Evaluation

Political memes play a significant role in shaping Generation Z's moral evaluation of political actors, public policies, and current issues. Unlike conventional forms of political communication, which are formal and argumentative, memes simplify political reality into concise, humorous, and easily consumed visuals. These characteristics perfectly align with Generation Z's information consumption patterns, which tend to be fast-paced, visual, and social media-based. As a result, the political messages implicit in memes are often more influential than long-form news stories or complex academic discourse.

It confirms that political memes presented in a humorous context are more easily accepted by first-time voters and have a significant impact on changing their attitudes. (Prihantoro et al., 2024)

Humor makes political messages feel lighter, more intimate, and less patronizing, thus reducing the audience's psychological resistance to them. It is in this context that moral judgments begin to form, not through in-depth rational analysis, but rather through spontaneous emotional reactions to the visuals and concise narratives offered by memes. A political figure can easily be perceived as funny, foolish, dangerous, wise, or heroic simply through a single image combined with a specific sarcastic caption.

Furthermore, Rezeki, Sagala, and Rabukit (2024) explain that political memes utilize various semiotic resources, such as color, facial expressions, cultural symbols, body gestures, and intertextuality to construct meaning. (Rezeki et al., 2024)

Elements of humor, irony, satire, and even hyperbole are used as primary tools to shape audience moral evaluations. For example, a meme might depict an official in an embarrassing pose accompanied by a specific narrative, causing the public to subconsciously make negative moral judgments about the figure. Conversely, memes can also glorify a particular figure by portraying them as a savior, an ideal leader, or a representation of the hopes of the younger generation.

Research on the function of memes in political discourse also shows that memes have special characteristics that make them very effective in shaping social perceptions, including: humor, caricature, clarity of visual messages, the ability to be replicated quickly, and the formation of group (in-group) and opponent (out-group) identities (The Function of Memes in Political Discourse, 2024).

The "in-group vs. out-group" concept is crucial in the context of moral evaluation, as it determines who is considered "good" and who is considered "bad" based on the perspective of a particular group. This situation creates polarization, where individuals tend to accept memes that support their group and reject or attack those that oppose them. For Generation Z, who are still in the process of forming political preferences, intense and repeated exposure to memes can shape new moral standards. Values about a figure's honesty, leadership, integrity, and worthiness are no longer based entirely on their track record, concrete policies, or factual data, but rather on how the figure is represented in the meme. This suggests that the moral evaluation process, which should be reflective and critical, has become reactive, emotional, and sometimes superficial.

Political memes also play a significant role in shaping Gen Z's moral judgments about political actors or issues. Through the use of sarcasm, irony, or exaggerated visual characterizations, memes can portray a candidate as honest and virtuous, or as untrustworthy. A 2023 UNICEF Indonesia survey showed that 90% of Gen Z use social media as their primary source of information, meaning their moral judgments are highly likely based on persuasive visual content. Through humor, memes can normalize or stigmatize certain political behaviors, for example, making a joke about an official's scandal or, conversely, highlighting the positive qualities of a particular candidate. Because moral evaluation is emotional, rather than factual, memes become an effective propaganda tool, especially for groups with a preference for fast information like Gen Z. Ultimately, these moral judgments inform the formation of their political attitudes, albeit based on very limited representation.

Thus, political memes cannot be viewed solely as digital entertainment. Memes have evolved into powerful ideological communication instruments, capable of influencing how Generation Z judges the merits of political behavior. In the context of the 2024 elections, memes have the potential to be a highly effective propaganda tool, as they can appeal to emotions, shape moral perceptions, and guide the political attitudes of the younger generation indirectly yet persuasively. Therefore, it is crucial for Generation Z to possess digital literacy and critical awareness to avoid relying entirely on simplistic and biased visual representations for their moral judgments.

Political memes have been shown to play a significant role in shaping Generation Z's moral judgments of political actors and issues through concise, humorous, and emotional visual representations. Compared to conventional political discourse, memes are more readily accepted because they align with Gen Z's rapid, social media-driven information consumption patterns. The humor, sarcasm, and visual symbols in memes reduce audience resistance and encourage reactive, rather than reflective, moral evaluations. As a result, judgments about the merits and deservingness of

a political figure are based more on visual impressions and brief narratives in memes than on factual data or policy track records.

Treatment Recommendation

The final stage in framing is how memes convey recommendations for action, both directly and implicitly. Many political memes subtly encourage Gen Z to vote for a particular candidate, question the credibility of others, or even promote political apathy. This phenomenon is evident in the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) report (2024), which noted a significant increase in covert digital propaganda via TikTok and Instagram during the 2024 election campaign, much of it packaged in meme form. These recommendations for action are often hidden in humor or absurd visuals, making them less likely to be perceived as political appeals, yet they nonetheless shape the preferences of young voters. Because Gen Z tends to respond to lighthearted and quick visual communication, the implicit messages in memes can indirectly influence their political choices. In other words, memes not only convey information but also guide their audiences to take certain positions in the political arena through subtle framing strategies.

Political memes in the 2024 election provide implicit recommendations for action to Gen Z through subtle calls to vote for certain candidates or cast doubt on opponents, often hidden in absurd humor on TikTok and Instagram. The Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) report until January 2024 recorded 204 pieces of violating internet content during the 36-day campaign, with 95% being hate speech and 35% on Instagram, the majority targeting the presidential and vice-presidential candidates, supporting the findings of veiled meme propaganda. A study of Gibran Rakabuming Raka shows that memes revolutionize the legitimacy of illiberal elites with digital-native language, mobilizing young voters while triggering intergenerational conflict, thus functioning as elite control rather than grassroots resistance.

Table 1. The "Treatment Recommendation" Mechanism in Entman's Framing Theory on the 2024 election political meme.

Recommendation Aspects	Description of the Journal	Bawaslu Data 2024	Analysis of Ubaidillah et al. (2025)	Impact on Gen Z (74.93 Million Voters)
Implicit Form	The call to vote for a candidate/doubt the opponent via absurd humor doesn't feel like propaganda.	204 content violated: 194 hate speech (95%), 72 on Instagram.	Gibran meme: digital-native humor resignifies elite power, not grassroots resistance.	Voice preferences are formed without verification, replace traditional agitation with fast visuals.
Dominant Platform	TikTok/Instagram, 2024 campaign surge.	Instagram (35%, 72 cases), Facebook (69), Twitter (54).	Instagram/X Gibran: mobilizing voters via illiberal performative memes.	90% of Gen Z sources information from social media, echo chambers strengthen recommendations.
Target & Scale	Gen Z is the main target, an indirect influence on political choices.	96% of the presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs' targets, 9 SARA politicization.	Gibran-Jokowi dynastic: shift to digital nativism, replace class divide.	Polarity is increasing, 68% of political information comes from social media

Elite Mechanism	Subtle framing of apathy/supportive attitudes.	Takedown 185 content, spread quickly via algorithm.	Memes as elite control, not grassroots; intensifying generational conflict.	Gen Z is guided by political positions via tech consumption, legitimizing illiberalism.
Sample case	Implicit memes support the candidate pair via visuals.	Candidate hate speech, 1 TikTok fake news.	Gibran memes: humor connects youth, align elite strategy with 2024 demographics.	Perceptions are formed emotionally, reducing critical literacy.

The table above processes data from a literature study, interpreting 204 Bawaslu violations as evidence of the scale of implied meme recommendations, which is in line with Ubaidillah's observation that the 2024 Election meme shift from conventional agitation to digital performativity, is effective on Gen Z with 68% of political information from social media. Interpretation and Link to Literature Data analysis shows that memes aren't just entertainment, but rather a complete Entman framing tool: the treatment recommendation stage is the most subversive because it's subtle, creating unconscious preferences. The Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) confirmed an increase in covert propaganda, with Instagram dominating according to Gen Z consumption patterns (185.3 million Indonesian internet users in 2024). (No Title, nd)

(Ubaidillah et al., 2025) Logically connect this to the illiberal context: Gibran's meme aligns elite strategy with youth demographics, generates victory via cyber troops and influencers, and intensifies echo chamber polarization. This finding is relevant to (Prihantoro et al., 2024) about the risk of humorous misinformation on young voters, where digital literacy is key to mitigation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study states that Generation Z (Gen Z) has a complex view of political memes as a propaganda tool in the 2024 Election. Generation Z primarily accesses political memes through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, considering them a relaxed, easy-to-understand, and entertaining means of communication. However, they are also aware of the potential for information manipulation and problem simplification contained within them. Political memes have proven to be an effective, subtle propaganda tool because they can influence Gen Z's understanding through Entman's four framing stages: defining the problem, interpreting the causes, forming moral judgments (especially through humor and sarcasm), and providing implicit suggestions for action. The effectiveness of memes in influencing the political views of Gen Z, who constitute the largest group in Indonesia's productive age population, indicates that their way of moral judgment has become responsive and emotional, rather than analytical. Therefore, digital literacy skills and critical awareness are essential for Gen Z to avoid relying on political judgments based on simplistic and biased visual images.

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