

Social Media and the Formation of Political Knowledge of Generation Z Students

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media has changed the consumption patterns of political information among the younger generation, especially Generation Z students. This study aims to analyze how social media is utilized as a source of political information and how this utilization shapes the political knowledge of students at HKBP Nommensen University, Pematangsiantar. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques in the form of semi-structured interviews with nine Generation Z students from several study programs. Interviews were conducted in January-February 2026 with a duration of 5–10 minutes for each informant. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of transcription, open coding, grouping themes, and data interpretation. The results show that TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter are the main platforms for accessing political information because they are considered fast, practical, and easy to access. Social media is perceived not only as a source of information, but also as a digital communication space that shapes students' political knowledge, opinions, and critical attitudes. However, the depth of political knowledge formed is still influenced by digital literacy, academic environment, peers, and social experiences. This study confirms that social media plays a role as an informal political learning space for Generation Z students..

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed the way society obtains, processes, and disseminates information, including political information. In the digital era, social media has become a key platform for young people to follow public issues, respond to policies, and form their political views (Anwar, Khadijah, & Lusiana, 2024). For Generation Z students, social media is not only a means of entertainment and communication, but also a crucial medium for obtaining fast, concise, visual, and easily accessible political information (Intyaswati, Maryani, Sugiana, & Venus, 2021).

As an educated group, students hold a strategic position in democratic life because they are expected to understand public issues critically and rationally. In practice, students' access to political information is increasingly shifting from conventional media to social media (Shortt, 2014). Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter have become primary sources of political information because they are considered more practical and closer to everyday digital habits (Wardah & Huda, 2023). In this context, social media is not only a channel for message distribution but also a communication environment that mediates issue exposure, public attention, and the formation of political meaning (Kim, Barnidge, & Kim, 2020).

On the one hand, social media offers advantages in terms of speed of information, ease of access, and diversity of perspectives (Różewski, Kieruzel, Lipczyński, & Prys, 2021). Students can learn about current political issues such as corruption, the performance of public officials, parliamentary debates, economic issues, disasters, and government programs (Hasanah, Rahayu, & Anggraini, 2022). On the other hand, political information on social media tends to be fragmented, influenced by algorithms, and not always verified. Therefore, an abundance of information does not automatically result in in-depth political knowledge (List, 2019). The political knowledge formed is still influenced by students' ability to select, verify, and interpret the information received (Alexieva, 2019).

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between social media and the younger generation, particularly in the context of digital political participation, social media use, and digital literacy. However, most of these studies still position social media as a means of communication or participation, rather than as a space for the formation of political knowledge understood through students' direct experiences and perceptions (Kusumawardani, Chandra Agustin, & Permatasari, 2025). This research positions social media not merely as a channel for information distribution, but as a digital communication space where students identify issues, compare views, form opinions, and interpret political realities.

This study has three main contributions (Silitonga, 2023). First, it focuses on Generation Z students at HKBP Nommensen University in Pematangsiantar, a rarely studied local context. Second, it views social media not merely as a source of information but as a space for the formation of political knowledge through students' exposure, interaction, and interpretation of political content (Nasrullah, 2015). Third, it demonstrates that the formation of students' political knowledge is influenced not only by social media exposure but also by digital literacy (Von Sikorski, Schmuck, Boukes, & Heiss, 2024), academic environments, friendships, and social experiences. This view aligns with findings that political learning in the digital space is influenced by content characteristics, algorithms, and user skills in processing information (Mustofa, Utama, & Andalus, 2024).

Based on the description, this study focuses on three main questions: how Generation Z students utilize social media as a source of political information, how they perceive the role of social media in shaping political knowledge, and what factors influence their political knowledge besides social media (Venus, Intyaswati, & Prihatiningsih, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the use of social media as a source of political information, examine students' perceptions of the formation of political knowledge, and identify non-social media factors that contribute to shaping students' political understanding (Pradana, 2017).

2. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand the experiences, views, and perceptions of Generation Z students regarding the use of social media in the formation of political knowledge. This approach was chosen because the study did not aim to measure statistical influence, but rather to explain how students interpret social media as a source of political information and how these digital experiences shape their understanding of public issues (Venus et al., 2023).

The research was conducted at HKBP Nommensen University, Pematangsiantar. The informants were nine active students belonging to the Generation Z category and active social media users. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: active

students of HKBP Nommensen University, belonging to the Generation Z age range, active social media users, and having accessed political content on social media (Von Sikorski et al., 2024).

Interviews were conducted in person from January to February 2026, lasting approximately 5–10 minutes per informant. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure a consistent guideline for questions, while still allowing informants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives in greater depth (Sugiyono, 2019). The focus of the interviews included the social media platforms used to obtain political information, the intensity of political content consumption, the political issues of greatest concern, perceptions of the influence of social media on expanding political knowledge, and other factors that contribute to shaping students' political knowledge (Creswell, 2016).

Table 1. Brief profile of informants

Informant code	Status	Study program
I1	Student	Science Education
I2	Student	Elementary School Teacher Education
I3	Student	Indonesian Language Education
I4	Student	Chemistry Education
I5	Student	Mechanical Engineering
I6	Student	Biology Education
I7	Student	Science Education
I8	Student	Mechanical Engineering
I9	Student	English language education

All informants are active students at HKBP Nommensen University, Pematangsiantar.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Interview results indicate that social media has become a primary source of political information for Generation Z students. Informants cited TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter as the platforms most frequently used to follow political issues. I1 and I2 obtained political information through TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. I4 used Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, while I9 cited X/Twitter as one of the platforms that provided the most political information in her experience. I5 also relied on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to follow current issues (Gardner, Thierry, Rowlandson, & Steinberger, 2021).

These findings indicate a shift in political information consumption patterns from conventional to digital media. Students consider social media more practical, faster, and easier to access via mobile phones. This finding aligns with studies showing that social media serves as a source of political learning and a means of disseminating information, becoming increasingly dominant among students and young voters (Mustofa et al., 2024).

Regarding access intensity, the informants showed varying patterns. I3 stated that she views political news on social media almost daily, while I4 reported accessing political news for about one to two hours, but not daily. I9 also mentioned that her interest in political issues increases when an issue goes viral or is widely discussed on social media. Several other informants don't always intentionally seek out political news, but still find it through platform homepages and recommendations (Meifilina, 2021).

This pattern suggests that students' political information consumption is not always planned, but rather is often shaped through the dynamics of issues and repeated exposure to digital timelines. In this context, students' political knowledge is formed not only through frequency of access but also through the process of interpreting issues that emerge in their daily digital environment (Hameleers, Powell, Van Der Meer, & Bos, 2020). The role of platform algorithms also appears crucial, as they help determine which issues consistently emerge and capture students' attention. These findings reinforce the argument that political learning on social media is heavily influenced by indirect exposure, cognitive elaboration, and users' digital communication environments (Venus et al., 2023).

The issues most frequently addressed by students included corruption cases, the performance of public officials, debates in the House of Representatives (DPR), economic issues such as foreign exchange rates, natural disasters, and government programs such as the Free Nutritious Meals Program. I4 learned about the issue of poisoning in government programs from social media. I6 paid attention to issues of corruption, foreign exchange rates, floods, and government programs that were widely discussed by the public. I7 and I8 were interested in parliamentary debates, national political issues, social politics, and policy issues directly related to people's lives (Masduki, 2021).

These findings suggest that students tend to be drawn to political issues that are relevant to their daily lives and are currently trending in the digital public sphere. Politics is understood not solely as an institutional issue, but also as a social issue that directly impacts society. In political communication studies, this suggests that social media helps connect macro-political issues with the everyday experiences of young audiences (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

Social media is perceived to have a significant influence on students' political knowledge. I1 and I2 believe social media facilitates access to political issues such as corruption and fraud and encourages them to think more critically. I6 believes social media is highly influential in broadening their horizons and changing their mindsets through intense exposure to information. I5 stated that social media has helped him learn many new things about politics. One informant emphasized that social media makes it easier to access political developments: "With social media, we can find out what developments are happening, especially in politics in Indonesia, so we understand better and can find out more quickly about current political developments" (I1).

These findings confirm that social media functions as a space for informal political learning. Students not only receive information but also develop initial understanding, broaden their perspectives, and formulate interpretations of the political issues they encounter. These findings align with research showing that social media can strengthen political learning when users engage in relevant information consumption and discussions (Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2018).

In addition to broadening horizons, social media also encourages the formation of opinions and critical thinking (Kusumawardani et al., 2025). Several informants assessed that social media helped them view political issues from various angles, assess officials' responses, and devise solutions to political problems. I9 explained that after viewing various content and public responses on social media, he began to form his own opinions about how political issues should be resolved (Kim et al., 2020). This demonstrates that social media operates not only at the level of information exposure but also at the level of forming interpretations and judgments.

These findings suggest that social media not only expands political knowledge at the level of issue recognition but also shapes opinions and reflections. However, this opinion formation does not always lead to open political expression. For some students, social media serves more as a space for observation, assessment, and reflection than for active participation (Intyaswati et al., 2021). This reinforces the view that cognitive elaboration plays a crucial role in the process of consuming political information on social media (Syahputra & Ritonga, 2019).

Although social media is a primary source of political information, several informants emphasized that their understanding is also influenced by other factors. I6, for example, indicated that searching for information via Google was done to support academic needs, while discussions with friends and college experiences helped deepen his understanding of political issues. Several informants also indicated that the campus environment, coursework, and conversations with peers contributed to their understanding of public issues.

These findings demonstrate that students' political knowledge is shaped through the intersection of digital experiences with academic and social experiences. Therefore, social media cannot be understood as the sole factor shaping political knowledge, but rather as a crucial element in students' everyday communication ecosystem. These findings also align with research showing that social media use must be interpreted in conjunction with the context of the user's social interactions and learning environment (Ryandaresta & Thoyib Amali, 2024).

Although social media is considered effective in broadening political knowledge, informants also noted challenges in sorting through circulating information (Wijayanti & Priyowidodo, 2024). Some students acknowledged that political information on social media is not always immediately reliable. Therefore, some of them attempted to compare information with other sources before accepting or sharing it (Hill, Canniford, & Millward, 2018).

These findings underscore the importance of digital literacy as a factor mediating the quality of political knowledge formed. High exposure to political issues does not necessarily lead to in-depth understanding without the ability to verify, compare, and critically interpret information (Setya Prihatining Tyas, Nazlah Azzahra, Bernika Meilani Ifada, & Noerma Kurnia Fajarwati, 2024). In this context, the quality of students' political knowledge is significantly influenced by their interpretive capacity as digital audiences. These findings reinforce the view that the relationship between social media and political literacy is complex and heavily influenced by users' skills in filtering information (Sarwono, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media plays an important role in shaping the political knowledge of Generation Z students. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter are not only sources of political information, but also digital communication spaces where students can identify issues, compare views, form opinions, and develop critical attitudes towards public issues. The main contribution of this research lies in explaining that the formation of students' political knowledge is determined not only by the intensity of social media exposure, but also by digital literacy skills, academic environment, friendships, and social experiences. Thus, social media can be understood as an important informal political learning space for Generation Z students, but the quality of the political knowledge formed remains highly dependent on students' ability to verify and critically interpret information.

This study is limited by the relatively limited number of informants and its focus on a single university, so the findings are not intended to be broadly generalized. Nevertheless, it provides an important contextual overview of the relationship between social media and the formation of political knowledge among Generation Z students.

SUGGESTION

Based on the research findings, strengthening digital literacy is crucial so that students not only quickly access political information but also are able to select, compare, and verify its contents. At the university level, the results of this study also demonstrate the need for academic discussion spaces that can help students connect exposure to digital information with a more reflective and critical understanding of politics. Future research could expand the number of informants, compare across study programs, or more specifically examine the role of social media algorithms in shaping students' political concerns

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