

DIGITAL NATIVES AND DIGITAL CHOICES: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON GEN-Z'S POLITICAL PREFERENCES IN THE 2024 NORTH SUMATRA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

Adi Pia ^{a*)}, Elly Warnisyah ^{a)}, Aminuddin ^{a)}

^{a)} Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

^{*)}Corresponding Author: adipialubis123@gmail.com

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Abstract. This study examines the contribution of online media to the political preferences of Generation Z (Gen-Z) in the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election. Unlike previous generations, Gen-Z, as digital natives, exhibits patterns of political information consumption centered on visual and interactive digital platforms. Employing a qualitative methodology that incorporated questionnaires administered to 102 respondents and in-depth interviews with 25 participants, this study analyzes the formation process of Gen-Z's political perceptions. The findings indicate that the Uses and Gratifications Theory is relevant in explaining the dominance of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, which fulfill Gen-Z's needs for edutainment and social interaction. Their process of political perception formation is strongly influenced by strategic Framing and political branding. Another key finding is the emergence of a hybrid participation model, where digital engagement triggers discussions in traditional social spaces. Gen-Z also demonstrates characteristics of Critical Digital Citizenship, exhibiting a critical stance toward disinformation and demanding data-driven content. This research provides theoretical contributions to the dynamics of digital political socialization and offers practical guidance for designing effective campaign strategies targeting young voters.

Keywords: Generation Z, Online Media, 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election, Political Branding, Digital Citizenship.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of political communication, particularly for Generation Z (Gen-Z)—the demographic cohort born between 1997 and 2012 [1]. Unlike previous generations, Gen-Z are digital natives who have grown up with unrestricted access to the internet, smart devices, and social media. This shift is reflected in their consumption of political information, which is predominantly sourced from platforms such as Instagram and TikTok rather than traditional media [2]. This transformation is particularly relevant in the context of the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election, where understanding Gen-Z's patterns of interaction with online media is crucial. These distinct consumption patterns establish online media as a significant force in shaping the political opinions and preferences of young voters.

The political participation of Gen-Z and Millennials in Indonesia has become increasingly significant, a trend also observed in North Sumatra. The General Elections Commission (KPU) notes that, on a national scale, young voters (Gen-Z and Millennials) dominate the electorate, constituting approximately 55% of the total voter base in the 2024 regional elections [3]. This percentage indicates that young voters possess substantial political leverage, making them a primary

target for political campaigns. Consequently, a thorough understanding of how they form political views and make decisions is key to predicting the outcome of the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election.

As a generation deeply integrated with digital technology, Gen-Z not only adopts digital devices as tools but also incorporates them into their social identity [4]. This reliance makes them highly responsive to various forms of digital innovation, including those in the political realm. They function not merely as passive consumers but as active producers and distributors of political information. Studies indicate that engagement with political news on social media enhances the political participation of young people [5], [6]. This participation transcends mere "likes" or "shares" to include active public discussions, online campaigns, and the formation of collective opinion [7]. Accordingly, political branding has become a vital instrument in modern political campaigns, with social media serving as the primary platform for candidates to build popularity and electability [8].

Despite the significant opportunities offered by online media, several challenges persist. A primary concern is the prevalence of disinformation and false news. Although Gen-Z possesses a higher level of digital literacy, they remain vulnerable to biased and unverified information [9]. This phenomenon can

potentially lead to polarization and influence the voting decisions of Gen-Z in the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election. Furthermore, local identity politics, as noted by Riza & Junaidi, presents another challenge that requires careful consideration [10]. An additional challenge is the discrepancy between digital political engagement and direct political participation. Barati argues that social media activity does not necessarily translate into offline participation, such as voter turnout at polling stations [11]. Other studies corroborate this gap [12], [13], raising questions about the effectiveness of online media in genuinely mobilizing tangible political action.

Various strategies have been proposed to maximize the potential of online media. Interactive and issue-based digital campaigns have proven more effective in attracting Gen-Z's support [14]. Originality in political communication is also a critical factor in building trust [15]. Moreover, enhancing digital literacy is a primary solution to combat disinformation [9], and the KPU has made efforts to provide factual information through its social media channels [16]. However, online strategies must be complemented by offline approaches. Barati and Kurniawan et al. suggest that direct engagement through public debates and community events remains vital to convert digital engagement into tangible action [11], [13]. The issue of identity politics must also be managed judiciously. From an Islamic political perspective, the use of identity is permissible as long as it does not incite animosity or ethnic fanaticism [17], a principle highly relevant in the diverse context of North Sumatra.

Although numerous studies have highlighted the role of online media for Gen-Z, several research gaps need to be addressed. First, there is limited in-depth research on how digital political engagement can effectively translate into tangible political participation. Second, the impact of social media algorithms in reinforcing information biases remains an area of debate requiring further investigation [9]. Finally, no studies have specifically identified the types of content and campaign narratives most effective for Gen-Z within the context of the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election. Therefore, this research aims to address these gaps by conducting an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing the voting decisions of Gen-Z in this election. The contribution of this study is not only theoretical, providing insights into the behavior of young voters, but also practical, offering value for formulating inclusive campaign strategies aligned with digital dynamics. The novelty of this research lies in its specific exploration of the dynamics of online media's influence on the preferences and voting decisions of Gen-Z in the context of a local election in Indonesia, distinguishing it from previous, more general studies. It also highlights the complex interplay among digital campaigns, the challenge of disinformation, and local identity politics, and how these factors converge to shape actual political participation.

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory presents a distinct perspective on the relationship between media and audiences, positioning individuals as active agents rather than passive recipients. In contrast to traditional communication

models focused on what media do to people, U&G shifts the inquiry to "what do people do with media?" [18]. This premise emphasizes that individuals consciously and intentionally select media to fulfill their psychological and social needs. In a digital media ecosystem saturated with choices, this theory is highly relevant for analyzing the motivations behind audience interactions, particularly among younger generations who possess greater autonomy in their information consumption.

Historically, U&G was developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, who identified that media selection is driven by diverse needs, such as the need for information, entertainment, social integration, and self-identity formation [18]. They argued that media compete with various other sources for need fulfillment, and the sustained use of a platform is highly dependent on the level of gratification it successfully provides. This framework became the foundation for more in-depth research into why audiences choose specific platforms and how that satisfaction influences their communication behaviors.

The core of U&G theory comprises four main assumptions. First, the audience is considered active and goal-oriented in its media choices. Second, media compete with other sources for need satisfaction. Third, the motivations for media use are diverse, encompassing cognitive (informational), affective (emotional), social (interactive), and personal (identity-related) needs. Fourth, the gratification obtained from media serves as the basis for subjective evaluations that determine future use. These assumptions make U&G a highly relevant theoretical framework for analyzing media behavior, particularly in contexts where the consumption of information, entertainment, and social interaction are often integrated within a single platform.

In the context of research on the contribution of online media to Gen-Z voters, U&G theory can serve as a lens to analyze the motivations behind selecting platforms like TikTok or Instagram as sources of political information. The theory allows researchers to move beyond quantitative data about platform usage and understand the deeper motivations behind it. For instance, do Gen-Z users choose these platforms for their visual and entertaining content, their ease of interaction with peers, or their need for concise and easily digestible political information? This understanding is crucial for uncovering the dynamics behind the digital political engagement of Gen-Z.

Furthermore, U&G can also help explain how online media function as a tool for political socialization for Gen-Z. Traditionally, political socialization was dominated by family, school, or community. However, for Gen-Z, this process also occurs through their interactions with digital content. With U&G, we can examine how they actively select political content not only to gain information but also to interact, form opinions, and even seek social validation from fellow users. This theory affirms that media use is not a mere passive act but an active process driven by individual needs and goals.

Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory

Agenda-Setting and Framing are two pivotal conceptual frameworks in political communication that holistically explain how media shape public perception of reality. Agenda-Setting theory answers the question of "what issues are important?",

while Framing answers “how are those issues to be understood?”. The combination of these theories demonstrates that the media wield a dual power: not only to determine which issues the public considers important but also to shape how the public interprets and evaluates them. In the digital age, this function has undergone a significant transformation, with online media becoming a primary arena for agenda-setting and narrative contests.

Formally, Agenda-Setting theory was introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, who found a strong correlation between the issues most frequently covered by the media (*media agenda*) and the issues considered most important by the public (*public agenda*) [19]. The core of the theory is that the media “are not successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.” By emphasizing certain issues, the media effectively increase the *salience* of those issues in the public consciousness. In the digital era, the agenda-setting function is no longer monopolized by mainstream media but is also influenced by influencers, content creators, and even trending topics on social media.

However, merely determining the issues is insufficient to explain shifts in political attitudes. This is where Framing Theory becomes instrumental. Grounded in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, framing is the process by which the media not only select issues but also construct the meaning of those issues through selection, emphasis, and interpretation [20]. As defined by Robert M. Entman, framing is the process of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” [21]. In other words, framing provides the audience with a specific way to understand facts, often with the goal of influencing their judgment of a candidate or policy.

In the context of this research, the combination of these two theories is highly relevant for analyzing the contribution of online media to the formation of Gen-Z’s political preferences. Agenda-Setting allows us to understand which issues are of primary concern to Gen-Z, whether environmental, economic, or corruption-related. Meanwhile, Framing helps reveal how these issues are presented and narrated—for example, whether a candidate is framed as an “innovative young leader” or as “lacking experience.” This dynamic also encompasses political branding, where candidates construct an identity relevant to Gen-Z through interactive and strategic digital content [8]. Thus, Agenda-Setting and Framing collectively explain that Gen-Z’s political preferences are shaped by the complex interaction between the issues raised and the manner in which they are presented in the digital sphere.

Political Socialization in the Digital Context

Political socialization is the essential process through which individuals internalize political values, attitudes, and knowledge. Traditionally, this process occurred via family, school, and conventional mass media. However, the digital era has fundamentally altered the landscape of political socialization, especially for Generation Z (Gen-Z). Social

media and online platforms have now become primary agents of political socialization, driving a shift from passive socialization to an active and participatory process. In the context of the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election, understanding the role of digital media in this process is vital for analyzing how Gen-Z forms political preferences, evaluates candidates, and ultimately makes their choice.

This shift is characterized by Gen-Z’s ability not only to consume but also to produce and discuss political content (*prosumption*). Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become digital public spheres where opinions are formed and political identities are constructed. Research indicates that social media use can enhance political efficacy—the belief that one’s political action can effect change—and political identification among young voters [22], [23]. This phenomenon is also evident in Indonesia, where social media has become the main source of political information for Gen-Z, supplanting the dominance of conventional media [2]. Despite potential infrastructural challenges, digital media have proven effective as a channel for political socialization in regions such as North Sumatra [24].

However, the process of digital political socialization is not without its challenges, a primary one being disinformation and false news. Although Gen-Z may have a higher awareness of these issues, they remain vulnerable to misleading information [9]. Therefore, digital literacy is a key prerequisite for this socialization process to proceed critically and autonomously [25]. On the other hand, digital political socialization also gives rise to new forms of participation, where Gen-Z can become agents of change through online social movements [26]. This participation is reinforced by social media, which can empower marginalized groups and facilitate new political discourses [27], [28].

Although digital media play a substantial role, the political socialization of Gen-Z continues to interact with traditional social structures. The influence of local identities—such as ethnicity, culture, and religion—remains relevant in shaping political decisions [29]. For example, local cultural practices can become a strategic space for political elites to galvanize support [30]. This indicates that digital political socialization cannot be detached from local and religious values. In this context, the use of identity in politics, particularly in a multi-ethnic region like North Sumatra, must uphold ethical values and social justice and must not incite animosity or blind fanaticism [17].

In the digital political socialization context, Gen-Z tends to exhibit a participant political culture, yet digital participation does not always convert into actual electoral participation [31]. Effective political communication strategies are decisive, with candidates who are interactive and original in their content having a greater chance of attracting support [14], [15]. Nevertheless, challenges such as *echo chambers* and *information bubbles*, created by social media algorithms, can narrow political horizons [9], [32]. Consequently, a hybrid participation model, which combines digital campaigns with offline strategies like face-to-face education, has proven more

effective in fostering substantive political participation [11], [13], [33].

The Concept of Critical Digital Citizenship

The concept of Critical Digital Citizenship represents an evolution in the understanding of citizen participation in the digital space. Diverging from approaches that merely emphasize access to or use of technology, this concept focuses on the capacity of individuals to critically analyze, meaningfully participate, and act ethically in the online environment. In the context of research on Gen-Z, this framework is key to assessing the quality of their engagement—not only *if* they are involved, but also *how substantive* that engagement is, and whether it moves beyond simple *liking* and *sharing* to transform into tangible political action.

Social media have become a primary platform that has transformed civic engagement, enabling individuals to connect with various social and political activities. Access to information and digital networks has been shown to encourage civic behavior among youth [34], [35]. Furthermore, active participation in digital civic activities often converts into increased offline involvement [36], [37]. Mulyono adds that social media can act as a catalyst to dismantle traditional barriers to participation, thus becoming a primary channel for Gen-Z in North Sumatra to interact with regional political issues [38].

However, this concept also highlights the phenomenon of *slacktivism*—superficial online engagement that does not always lead to meaningful civic action [39], [40]. This phenomenon points to a gap between digital participation and tangible action, which is a central challenge in fostering active digital citizens. To address this, critical media literacy and civic education are required to equip young people with the ability to critically evaluate information and distinguish between fact and opinion [41], [42]. This education is crucial for helping Gen-Z navigate challenges such as hoaxes and algorithmic manipulation [9], [25].

Thus, Critical Digital Citizenship is not merely about participation but also about the quality, depth, and ethical responsibility of digital engagement. This concept offers a framework for analyzing how Gen-Z can transform from passive consumers of political information into agents capable of critique and action based on a critical, responsible understanding. In the complex era of online media, this concept serves as a crucial foundation for understanding how technology can contribute positively to the formation of active, critical, and autonomous digital citizens.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to interpret the meanings, motivations, and subjective experiences of Gen-Z respondents regarding the contribution of online media to their political preferences—aspects that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods [43]. The descriptive

case study design enables the researcher to present a rich and comprehensive picture of the dynamics at play among young voters in North Sumatra.

To collect data, this study utilized a combination of two techniques: an online survey and in-depth interviews. Initially, an online survey was administered to 102 Gen-Z respondents to gather preliminary data on their online media consumption patterns and general views on political issues. Subsequently, from this pool of 102 respondents, 25 individuals were selected for in-depth interviews using a purposive sampling technique. The selection of these interviewees was based on criteria relevant to the research, including:

1. **Geographic Diversity:** Respondents were selected from various locations in North Sumatra (e.g., Medan, Deli Serdang, Binjai) to reflect both urban and semi-urban dynamics.
2. **Social Diversity:** Interviewees were chosen from diverse ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds (including university students and young professionals) to obtain a range of perspectives.
3. **Level of Media Engagement:** Selected respondents exhibited varied patterns of online media use, ranging from highly active to moderate, to explore differences in their motivations and perceptions.

These in-depth interviews were designed to elicit more detailed information regarding the motivations, experiences, and meanings behind their digital political behaviors.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the collected data [43]. The analytical stages included coding the data, grouping these codes into themes, and interpreting them to answer the research questions. To ensure validity and reliability, the researcher employed data triangulation, which involved comparing and verifying data from the surveys and the interviews. This method, as affirmed by Creswell & Poth, strengthens the research findings by ensuring the consistency and accuracy of information obtained from multiple sources [44].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile and Social Context of Gen-Z in North Sumatra

This study involved 102 Gen-Z respondents (aged 17–26 in 2024), reflecting the social diversity of North Sumatra in terms of education, location, ethnicity, and religion. The majority of respondents were in the 18–22 age range (68.6%) and were university students (70.6%). This fact underscores that the research focuses on young voters with high levels of digital access and education, making the findings particularly relevant to the dynamics of digital politics among university students and urban voters.

The geographical distribution of respondents shows the largest concentration in Medan City (43.1%), the hub of urban and digital activity in North Sumatra. Surrounding buffer zones such as Deli Serdang (17.6%), Binjai (11.8%), and others were also represented, ensuring that the findings reflect not only urban realities but also the political dynamics in surrounding

regions. In this context, online media serves as a crucial infrastructure connecting young voters with political issues, regardless of their geographical location.

In terms of social background, the respondent composition reflects the multi-ethnic and multi-religious societal structure of North Sumatra. The Batak (45.1%) and Javanese (23.5%) ethnic groups were predominant, while Islam (52.9%) and Christianity (43.1%) had significant representation. This diversity provides an essential foundation for analyzing how online media not only conveys information but also interacts with traditional social structures, including identity politics, which remains relevant in the electoral context [17].

Overall, this demographic profile indicates that the research respondents are broadly representative of the Gen-Z population in North Sumatra, particularly in urban and surrounding areas. Their diverse social backgrounds provide a critical lens for understanding how political preferences are shaped by the dynamic interplay between digital information and local social structures.

The table below summarizes the demographic distribution of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Count (N=102)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–22 years	70	68.6%
	23–26 years	32	31.4%
Education	University Student	72	70.6%
	Employed	24	23.5%
	High School Student	6	5.9%
Location	Medan	44	43.1%
	Deli Serdang	18	17.6%
	Binjai	12	11.8%
	Pematang Siantar	8	7.8%
	Nias	6	5.9%
	Langkat	5	4.9%
Ethnicity	Others	9	8.8%
	Batak	46	45.1%
	Javanese	24	23.5%
	Malay	18	17.6%
	Nias	8	7.8%
Religion	Others	6	6.0%
	Islam	54	52.9%
	Christianity	44	43.1%
	Others	4	4.0%

Patterns of Online Media Use as the Primary Source of Political Information

Political information consumption patterns among Gen-Z demonstrate a fundamental shift from conventional media to visual and interactive digital platforms. Data from this study confirm that online media has become the primary, and in some cases, sole source for the majority of young voters in the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election. This shift reflects a profound transformation in how Gen-Z acquires, processes, and disseminates political information, aligning with their characteristics as digital natives who grew up in an on-demand media ecosystem [1].

The dominance of platforms like TikTok (60.8%) and Instagram (56.9%) indicates a preference among Gen-Z for concise and easily digestible content formats. This phenomenon can be explained through the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, which positions the audience as active agents who select media to meet their specific needs [18]. For Gen-Z, these platforms fulfill not only the need for political

information (*edutainment*) but also social needs such as interaction and validation. A respondent from Medan stated, “When I look for political info, I go straight to TikTok. There are duets, stitches, or threads explaining a candidate’s vision and mission. It’s easier to digest than reading a long article” [45]. This preference underscores that Gen-Z seeks a blend of information and entertainment, rendering political content no longer boring but engaging and relevant to their digital culture.

The frequency of political content consumption is also high, with 62% of respondents consuming content fairly to very frequently. Nevertheless, the types of content preferred vary. Short video content on work programs (70 respondents) and public debates/dialogues (62 respondents) indicate a desire among Gen-Z for substantive information, while humorous/satirical political content (58 respondents) serves as an entry point for previously apathetic voters. “I used to just like the funny stuff. But it turns out, I learned about their policies from those memes,” said one respondent (I-04) [46], which aligns with Lestari’s research that creative digital campaigns are more effective in capturing the attention of young voters [14].

Interaction with digital political content also sparks in-depth social discussions. A total of 72 respondents stated that they discuss political issues with others, including friends and family. This shows that digital engagement does not end on the screen but transcends virtual and real-world boundaries. This process creates a new, interactive, and collaborative form of political participation, where young voters are not just passive consumers but also producers and disseminators of information (*prosumption*) [47].

However, amidst this high level of engagement, a serious challenge emerges regarding digital literacy and trust. Although 41.2% of respondents only trust information from official sources, another 11.8% admit to trusting content if it is “shared by many people,” indicating the influence of social proof. This phenomenon is reinforced by research from Prelog & Bakic-Tomic, which asserts that Gen-Z, despite being aware of hoaxes, remain vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation [9]. This critical attitude suggests that Gen-Z are active assessors attempting to navigate a complex digital landscape, not merely passive consumers.

Online media have become a key determinant in shaping Gen-Z’s understanding of the candidates in the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election. Out of 102 respondents, 72 (70.6%) stated that online media had a significant influence in helping them understand the candidates’ visions, missions, work programs, and character. This finding indicates that online media is no longer merely an information channel but has become a primary source for the critical and in-depth formation of political perception among young voters.

One significant finding is the ability of digital content to change respondents’ political views, which serves as empirical evidence of the effectiveness of Framing Theory. Based on the work of Robert M. Entman, this theory explains that media not only present facts but also select and highlight certain aspects of reality to influence public interpretation [21]. A total of 38 respondents (37.3%) stated that they had changed their views

due to the content they consumed, particularly posts that clarified a candidate's work program (39.5%) or content that exposed a candidate's negative aspects (31.6%). This suggests that Gen-Z are influenced by the narratives constructed in the digital sphere, whether positive or negative.

The following table summarizes the respondents' online media usage patterns:

Aspect	Category	Count (N=102)	Percentage (%)
Primary Platform	TikTok	62	60.8%
	Instagram	58	56.9%
	Online News Media	34	33.3%
	WhatsApp	24	23.5%
	Group		
	YouTube	18	17.6%
	Political Podcast	13	12.7%
Frequency of Consumption	Very Frequent	18	17.6%
	Fairly Frequent	46	45.1%
	Infrequent	30	29.4%
	Never	8	7.8%
Influence of Online Media	Very High	32	31.4%
	Fairly High	40	39.2%
	Minor	22	21.6%
	No Influence	8	7.8%
Trust in Information	Official Sources	42	41.2%
	Requires Verification	30	29.4%
	Viral (Widely Shared)	12	11.8%
	No Trust at All	8	7.8%

The Process of Political Perception Formation through Online Media

Political branding also serves as a crucial instrument in shaping a candidate's image. Gen-Z not only seeks factual information but also builds perceptions of candidates as authentic and relevant public figures. A total of 44 respondents (43.1%) were attracted to candidates who demonstrated concern for local issues, while 38 respondents (37.3%) favored candidates who were authentic and not rigid on social media [8]. This confirms that a successful political communication strategy must be able to build a consistent and relevant narrative that aligns with Gen-Z's values through creative and authentic content.

Nevertheless, Gen-Z demonstrates a critical awareness of superficial branding. A total of 30 respondents (29.4%) stated they were skeptical and needed to verify claims made on social media. This indicates that young voters do not passively accept political narratives but are active assessors who attempt to distinguish between fact and image-crafting. Therefore, effective political branding must be built ethically and based on integrity, not merely on image manipulation, to win the trust of an increasingly critical young electorate.

Online media functions not only as an information tool but has also transformed into a catalyst for social discussions that transcend virtual and real-world boundaries. The findings of this study show that 78 respondents (76.5%) discuss political information they obtain from online media with others. This phenomenon proves that the political engagement of Gen-Z is interactive, where the consumption of digital content often serves as a trigger for conversations in their social environments, both with friends and family.

This discussion reflects the concept of presumption, where young voters are not just passive consumers but also active producers and disseminators of political information [47]. Digital content, even entertainment-oriented content like memes and parodies, can become material for serious discussion. One respondent stated, "I'll see a video on TikTok and then ask my friend, 'Did you see this? What do you think?'" [48]. This demonstrates that online media has become a bridge connecting individual information with communal spaces, where opinions are formed and negotiated.

The table below summarizes the influence of online media on the formation of Gen-Z's political perceptions.

Aspect of Perception Formation	Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Influence of Online Media on Understanding Candidates	Very High	32	31.4%
	Fairly High	40	39.2%
	Minor	22	21.6%
	No Influence	8	7.8%
Reasons for Changing Views on a Candidate (N=38)	Posts that clarified work programs	15	39.5%
	Videos/news exposing negative aspects	12	31.6%
	Public reactions on social media	11	28.9%
	Concern for local issues	44	43.1%
Appealing Candidate Image Aspects	Authentic and not rigid/approachable	38	37.3%
	Responsive and interactive	32	31.4%

Interaction between the Digital World and Traditional Social Structures

Although online media dominate in information delivery, the roles of family and local figures remain significant in decision-making. Only 21.6% of respondents base their decisions solely on online media, while 52.9% admit that their decision is a combination of digital information and traditional social influences. "I see things on social media and discuss them on campus, but in the end, I ask my parents. They know the region's political history," said I-15 [49]. This statement confirms that Gen-Z's political participation is the result of a hybrid participation model, where digital interaction and social dialogue complement each other [33].

The dynamics of ethnic and religious identity also remain an important factor negotiated against digital information. Although 47.1% of respondents consider ethnicity and religion in their voting choice, some of them exhibit a critical stance. "I want to vote for someone with a clear program, not just because of their ethnicity," said I-19 [50]. This indicates a tension between social pressures and rational considerations, showing that Gen-Z do not reject identity but are critical of its provocative and divisive use [17].

Although online media is their primary source of political information, Gen-Z demonstrates a critical and selective attitude, reflecting a relatively high level of digital literacy. Of the 102 respondents, 42 (41.2%) stated that they place more trust in information from official and verified sources. This

attitude indicates that they do not passively accept information but consciously cross-verify to ensure source credibility, as a response to the prevalence of disinformation and hoaxes on social media.

The following table summarizes the interaction between the digital world and traditional social structures.

Aspect	Category	Count (N=102)	Percentage (%)
Political Engagement	Yes	84	82.4%
	No	18	17.6%
Discusses Politics with Others	Yes	78	76.5%
	No	24	23.5%
Primary Basis for Voting Decision	Online Media Only	22	21.6%
	Combination of Online & Social Influence	54	52.9%
	Social Influence Only	8	7.8%
Considerations in Voting	Ethnicity and Religion	48	47.1%
	Work Program and Performance	54	52.9%

Digital Literacy, Skepticism, and Expectations of Gen-Z

This critical stance can be directly linked to the concept of **Critical Digital Citizenship**, which emphasizes the ability of individuals to critically analyze information, participate meaningfully, and act ethically in the online environment. Although 30 respondents (29.4%) stated the need for verification, 12 respondents (11.8%) admitted to trusting content if it was “shared by many people.” This phenomenon reveals a contradiction between digital literacy and the influence of *social proof*, where virality can create an illusion of truth. This condition aligns with research showing that Gen-Z, despite being aware of hoaxes, remain vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation and *echo chambers* on social media [9].

Gen-Z’s critical perspective is also reflected in their expectations for the quality of political content. A total of 34 respondents (33.3%) explicitly desire neutral and data-driven content, while 22 respondents (21.6%) called for a reduction in provocation and hoaxes. This demand shows that they want political media that is not only engaging but also educational and responsible. “I want to see a comparison of visions and missions, not just attacks on each other,” stated one respondent [51], reflecting their desire to make decisions based on rational considerations, a characteristic of mature digital citizens.

Furthermore, Gen-Z also has expectations regarding the role of young influencers in disseminating relevant political literacy. They view influencers as more authentic and relatable alternative authorities compared to mainstream media. This expectation shows that Gen-Z are not just passive spectators but also agents of change who wish to see a healthier, more collaborative, and democratic digital political space. This serves as a call for stakeholders to innovate in political

communication that is not only persuasive but also educates and empowers young voters, in line with the goals of Critical Digital Citizenship itself.

The following table summarizes Gen-Z’s level of trust and expectations regarding online media:

Aspect	Category	Count (N=102)	Percentage (%)
Level of Trust in Political Information	Trusts if from an official source	42	41.2%
	Skeptical and requires verification	30	29.4%
	Trusts if widely shared (viral)	12	11.8%
	Does not trust at all	8	7.8%
Expectations/Suggestions for Online Media	Present neutral, data-driven information	34	33.3%
	Reduce provocation or hoaxes	22	21.6%
	Create creative yet educational content	12	11.8%
	Involve young influencers in spreading political literacy	3	2.9%

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The key findings of this study indicate that Gen-Z actively selects digital platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram, to fulfill their needs for edutainment and social interaction, consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This engagement is not passive but rather a critical process wherein perceptions of candidates are shaped by compelling narratives and strategic framing. Nevertheless, Gen-Z exhibits a high degree of skepticism, reflecting an impetus to become Critical Digital Citizens who not only consume but also verify information and demand neutral, data-driven content. Furthermore, this study finds that digital engagement is not isolated from traditional social structures. Political discussions triggered by online content often extend into real-world conversations with family and friends, indicating a hybrid participation model. This suggests that while online media is dominant, social influences and local identity remain relevant in shaping the voting decisions of Gen-Z. Overall, this research offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the study enriches the understanding of political

socialization and digital citizenship dynamics among young voters within the context of local elections. Practically, the findings provide guidance for political actors and campaign teams in designing more authentic, interactive, and data-driven communication strategies to bridge the gap between digital engagement and tangible political participation. Given the increasingly crucial role of Gen-Z, fostering a healthy and ethical digital ecosystem will be a key challenge in ensuring a more inclusive and participatory democratic future.

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