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The Role of Generation Z on Social Media in Facilitating Political Activism in the Digital Era

Diah Nafa Rani Nabila^{1*}, Trisakti Handayani², Budiono³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Malang, Indonesia

Correspondence: nafanabila1007gmailcom@webmail.umm.ac.id¹

This study aims to examine the role of Generation Z in utilizing social media as a platform for political activism and mobilization in the digital era, with a particular focus on East Java Province. Social media has evolved into a digital public sphere that enables young people to access political information, express their views, and build political engagement in a more open and dynamic manner. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study method involving individual digital activists and the student organization BEM SI East Java Region as research subjects. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation of social media activities, and literature review. The findings indicate that social media plays a significant role in shaping Generation Z's political communication strategies and encouraging the gradual mobilization of political participation through digital networks. However, digital political activism also faces several challenges, including the spread of disinformation, opinion polarization, social pressure, and concerns regarding digital regulation. This study concludes that social media serves as a strategic instrument in transforming Generation Z's political participation toward more participatory digital democratic practices, while still requiring strengthened digital literacy and supportive policies to ensure a healthy and inclusive digital space.

KEYWORDS

generation z; social media; political activism; digital democracy.

Introduction

The role of Generation Z on social media in the context of political mobilization and activism in East Java has become increasingly prominent alongside the rapid development of digital communication technologies. As digital natives, Generation Z utilizes social media not only as a platform for information sharing but also as a strategic space for building political awareness, organizing collective action, and expanding public participation (Effendy, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) enable the emergence of new forms of political participation that are more creative, inclusive, and interactive, particularly among young people who tend to avoid conventional political channels (Astuti & Wulandari, 2025; Samsudin et al., 2024).

Social media has evolved into a digital public sphere that facilitates political engagement and activism, especially within youth demographics (Dewi et al., 2023). Previous studies indicate that social media plays a crucial role in increasing political awareness and encouraging active civic engagement among young citizens in post-reform Indonesia (Dasri, 2025). Digital platforms have also proven to be effective tools for political campaigns, allowing more direct, personalized, and interactive communication between political actors and young constituents (Juditha & Darmawan, 2024; Qalbuadi et al., 2024). However, this transformation is accompanied by challenges such as the spread of disinformation, algorithm-driven polarization, and the formation of filter bubbles that may weaken democratic deliberation (Ayuni & Sari, 2025; Sadikin, 2025).

Empirical evidence further demonstrates that social media significantly influences political behavior, particularly among first-time voters (Natalia et al., 2025). Interactive political discourse, multimedia-based political education, and direct engagement between candidates and citizens contribute to increased political participation and critical awareness among young voters (Nayiroh & Ema, 2024). In this context, social

media is not merely a communication tool but a medium that reshapes political socialization and participation patterns (Media, 2024; Robiyanti et al., 2024).

For Generation Z, social media functions as a primary arena for articulating political aspirations, criticizing public policies, and organizing digital-based social movements. Research by (Putra et al., 2024) shows that Generation Z relies heavily on social media to disseminate political narratives, mobilize support, and construct collective opinions through networked digital interactions. Similarly, (Izzati et al., 2021) emphasize that Generation Z's political behavior on social media is strongly influenced by participatory values and a desire for direct involvement in social and political issues. Digital activism among this generation is therefore not merely symbolic but represents a tangible form of political expression and collective action (Fathurochman & Tutiasri, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on digital political participation in Indonesia, many previous studies primarily focus on the role of social media in influencing voting behavior, political attitudes, or electoral campaigns at the national level (Saadah et al., 2022; Stiawan & Dock, 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between social media and political engagement, they often pay limited attention to how Generation Z actors actively construct and practice digital political activism in specific regional contexts (Cahyo et al., 2025; Qalbuadi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, existing research tends to emphasize the outcomes of digital political communication, such as voter participation or political preferences, rather than examining the internal processes through which activists design and disseminate political messages on social media platforms (Rahmadani et al., 2024). Consequently, the dynamics of grassroots digital activism particularly how young activists develop communication strategies, mobilize audiences, and respond to public interactions in digital environments remain insufficiently examined in the Indonesian context (Achmad & Dwimawanti, 2025; Hossain et al., 2025).

In addition, most studies on digital political participation in Indonesia are conducted at the national level, leaving regional socio-political contexts relatively underexplored. This limitation is important because local political environments, student movements, and community networks can influence how young people interpret political issues, construct narratives, and engage in political activism through social media platforms.

East Java is a key region for studying these dynamics due to its large Generation Z population and the active presence of student organizations that utilize social media for political communication. However, empirical research specifically examining how Generation Z actors use social media to facilitate political activism and mobilization at the regional level remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of social media in facilitating political activism among Generation Z in East Java, focusing on three main aspects: the digital communication strategies used by activists, patterns of political mobilization through social media, and audience responses to digital political activism practices. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing a local and contextual understanding of Generation Z's political participation in the digital age. Ultimately, this study argues that social media functions as a strategic instrument in transforming Generation Z's political participation toward a more collaborative, participatory, and inclusive form of digital democracy, while emphasizing the need to strengthen digital literacy and supportive public policies to maintain a healthy and inclusive digital public sphere.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study method to explore the dynamics of digital political activism among Generation Z through social media. This approach enables researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of the meanings, motivations, and communication strategies underlying digital political participation practices. Descriptive qualitative research is considered relevant in political communication studies because it provides broad interpretative space for examining social realities constructed within digital media environments (Saadah et al., 2022). The research was conducted in East Java Province, particularly focusing on student communities and digital activism activities in Surabaya and Malang, with data collection carried out between November and December 2025.

This study involved six informants who were directly engaged in digital political activism practices. The first informant was Aulia Thariq Akbar, an individual digital activist who actively produces and disseminates socio-political content through his Instagram account @athaariq_akbar. The remaining five informants were representatives of the All-Indonesia Student Executive Board (BEM SI) East Java Region, consisting of the regional coordinator, the head of the social media division, and three active members responsible for managing and disseminating political content through the organization's Instagram account @bemsj_jati. The research object focused on the use of Instagram as a platform for digital political communication and mobilization, including strategies for disseminating political messages, forms of online participation, and challenges faced in articulating public aspirations in digital spaces.

Data were collected using three techniques: in-depth interviews, online questionnaires, and social media documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with two key informants, namely the individual activist and the BEM SI regional coordinator, to explore their experiences and strategies in conducting digital political activism through Instagram. Due to scheduling limitations and the inability to conduct direct or synchronous interviews with several BEM SI members, an online questionnaire was distributed to four representatives from BEM SI, including the head of the social media division and three active members. The questionnaire aimed to obtain information regarding their roles in managing digital political communication, their strategies in producing social media content, and their perspectives on digital activism practices. Social media documentation was also conducted by observing posts, captions, visual content, and interaction patterns on the relevant Instagram accounts.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved stages of data familiarization, coding, identification of key themes, and interpretation of findings in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and previous studies (Suryani & Purnomo, 2022). To ensure the validity of the research findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, questionnaire responses, and social media observations. Ethical considerations were also implemented in the research process. All informants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent to participate. Informants who agreed to be publicly acknowledged were mentioned using their real names, while other participants were referred to by their organizational roles to maintain confidentiality.

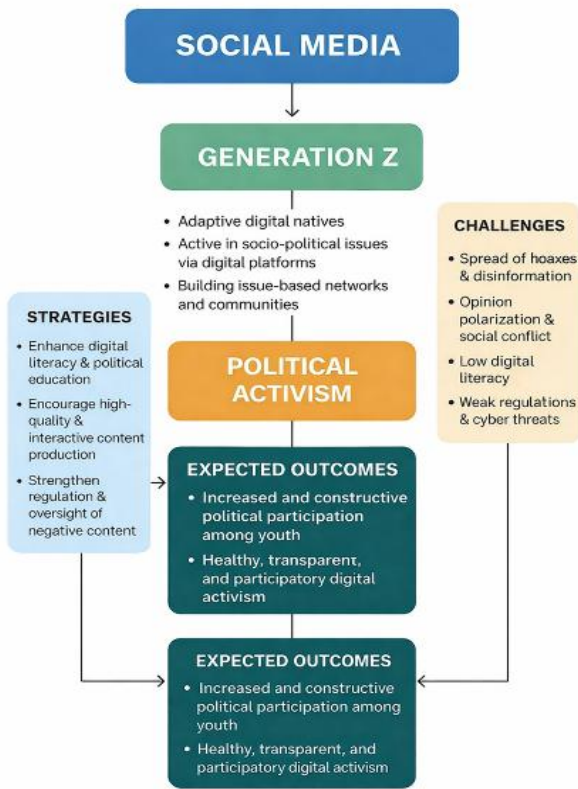


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Result and Discussion

Research Setting and Informant Profile

This study was conducted within the context of digital political activism among Generation Z through social media, particularly Instagram. The research setting was not limited to a physical location but focused on digital spaces where political participation and activism are actively practiced by young people. Institutionally, the study examined the All-Indonesia Student Executive Board (BEM SI) East Java Region as a regional student movement representing organized digital activism. Data collection was conducted between November and December 2025, corresponding with the period of active social media engagement among the observed activists and student organizations. The observed activities included advocacy content production, dissemination of political narratives, and online interactions, positioning the research setting as a dynamic digital social space.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, involving individuals and groups directly engaged in digital political activism. To maintain research ethics, informant identities were partially anonymized while their roles and characteristics were clearly described. The first informant was Aulia Thariq Akbar, an individual digital activist who independently produces and disseminates socio-political content through Instagram. The second group of informants consisted of representatives from BEM SI East Java, including the regional coordinator, head of the social media division, and active members, representing collective and organized digital activism. This diversity of informants enabled the study to capture variations in Generation Z's digital activism practices.

Digital Communication Strategies in Generation Z Political Activism

The findings indicate that the digital communication

strategies employed by Generation Z activists are not spontaneous but are consciously designed by considering issue contexts, audience characteristics, and the operational mechanisms of social media platforms. Digital activism is understood as a form of political communication that requires careful planning to ensure messages are effectively received and understood by the public. Informants emphasized that political issues must be communicated in ways that align with youth communication styles, which tend to be visual, concise, and easily accessible.

As an individual activist, Aulia Thariq Akbar explained that every piece of content he publishes is preceded by issue research. He reviews news articles, policy documents, and public discussions before constructing narratives. According to him, digital activism is not merely about expressing personal opinions but about disseminating accountable information.

"I don't want to speak carelessly. I usually read the news first, check the sources, and then summarize it in my own words" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

In addition to research, language selection is a key consideration. Aulia noted that overly aggressive language tends to generate audience resistance; therefore, he prefers an educational and narrative approach to broaden message acceptance.

"If the language feels attacking, people become defensive. I prefer explaining things gradually so people can reflect on them themselves" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

Social media algorithms also influence communication strategies. Aulia explained that posting time and content format significantly affect message reach, leading him to upload content during periods with higher engagement potential.

"Posting time really matters. If you choose the wrong time, the content just gets buried" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

At the organizational level, BEM SI East Java Region implements a more structured and collective communication strategy. Muhammad Aqomaddin, the Regional Coordinator, stated that every published post is the result of inter-campus consolidation to ensure organizational coherence.

"Our content is the result of discussions among many campuses. It's not one person's opinion but a collective stance" (Interview with BEM SI East Java Coordinator).

Observation of the Instagram account @bemsijatim shows that content is presented in the form of digital posters, short videos, and official statements. The narratives are concise yet substantive, emphasizing public policy issues and societal interests, indicating that digital communication functions as the primary channel for expressing student organizations' political positions.

Forms and Patterns of Digital Political Mobilization

The study reveals that Generation Z's digital political mobilization occurs gradually and does not always culminate in offline actions. Social media serves as an initial space for awareness-building and information dissemination. Mobilization is understood as a process of fostering audience engagement rather than merely encouraging street demonstrations.

In individual activism, mobilization primarily aims to cultivate critical awareness. Aulia stated that he does not always call for physical actions but encourages audiences to understand issues and disseminate them further.

"I don't always call for protests. Sometimes it's enough if people understand the issue and start talking about it" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

In contrast, mobilization within student organizations is conducted more systematically. BEM SI East Java uses social media to disseminate calls to action, political stances, and participation appeals. Digital content serves as an initial coordination tool before further offline consolidation.

"We usually build the issue on social media first, and then

proceed with further consolidation" (Interview with BEM SI East Java Social Media Division).

Observations of BEM SI East Java's Instagram posts reveal a recurring pattern: issue dissemination, audience responses, and follow-up action calls. Features such as "add your story," account tagging, and hashtag usage are employed to expand message reach. Questionnaire data indicate that some respondents felt encouraged to participate by sharing content, perceiving reposting as a realistic and capacity-appropriate form of political participation. These findings suggest that Generation Z's digital political mobilization is adaptive, gradual, and context-sensitive.

Audience Responses and Participation in Digital Activism

The findings show that audiences are not passive recipients of digital activism. They actively engage through comments, content sharing, and extended discussions. Audience responses play a crucial role in shaping digital activism dynamics by creating interactive spaces between activists and the public.

On individual activist accounts, audience responses tend to take the form of discussions and reflections. Many comments contain opinions, personal experiences, or follow-up questions. Aulia stated that he often reads and reflects on audience comments as part of his learning process.

"Sometimes, other people's comments give me new perspectives" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

On the BEM SI East Java account, audience responses are more diverse, ranging from support to criticism and dissent. The social media division acknowledged that such diversity is typical in political discourse.

"Some people support us, others are cynical. That's normal in political issues" (Interview with BEM SI East Java Social Media Division).

Observations indicate that posts addressing national issues tend to generate higher engagement than internal campus-related topics, as reflected in comment volume and content sharing. Questionnaire results further show that audiences perceive social media as facilitating political participation without requiring organizational membership. Participation is viewed as light yet meaningful, reflecting the flexible and fluid nature of Generation Z's political engagement.

Challenges in Digital Political Activism

The study identifies various personal and structural challenges in digital political activism, including social pressure, digital harassment, and regulatory concerns. Digital activism does not always provide a sense of safety for its practitioners.

Aulia Thariq Akbar reported receiving negative comments and personal attacks, which affected his emotional well-being, although it did not deter him from continuing his activism.

"Sometimes it's exhausting reading negative comments, but I'm aware that risks come with it" (Interview with Aulia Thariq Akbar).

At the organizational level, challenges include negative framing and the presence of coordinated online actors. Muhammad Aqomaddin noted that BEM SI content is often misinterpreted or distorted.

"Sometimes our statements are twisted as if we are anti-state" (Interview with BEM SI East Java Coordinator).

Concerns regarding digital regulations, such as Indonesia's Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law), also influence communication practices. Informants emphasized the importance of cautious language selection to avoid legal repercussions.

"We have to be extra careful so we don't face legal problems" (Interview with BEM SI East Java Social Media

Division).

Questionnaire data indicate that some audience members hesitate to comment publicly due to fears of being attacked or misunderstood. These challenges demonstrate that while social media expands participation spaces, it also introduces risks that accompany digital political engagement.

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media, particularly Instagram, plays a significant role in facilitating digital political activism among Generation Z. The platform functions not only as a medium for disseminating political information but also as a space for constructing political narratives, mobilizing audiences, and shaping public discourse. Generation Z activists utilize Instagram strategically by presenting political messages in formats that are accessible and appealing to younger audiences, such as visual content, short captions, infographics, and interactive features that encourage audience engagement. At the individual level, digital activism tends to emphasize political education and the development of critical awareness, while at the organizational level, particularly within student organizations such as BEM SI, communication strategies are implemented collectively through internal coordination processes involving issue selection, content curation, and narrative development. Digital political mobilization occurs in a hybrid manner, where online activities function as an initial stage for awareness-building and audience engagement that may later lead to offline collective actions.

Through reposting, sharing, commenting, and other interaction features, political messages can circulate across digital communities and contribute to the formation of networked political participation among young audiences. However, digital activism also faces several challenges, including the high volume of competing content on social media, the spread of misinformation, opinion polarization, social pressure, and concerns related to digital regulations, all of which influence how political messages are articulated in online spaces. Overall, these findings contribute to the literature on digital political participation by highlighting how Generation Z actors actively construct political activism practices through social media platforms at the regional level, emphasizing that digital activism should be understood not only as a technological phenomenon but also as a social and communicative process shaped by the strategies, motivations, and interactions of young political actors.

These findings are consistent with the studies of (Antameng et al., 2024) and (Arifin et al., 2024), which emphasize that political communication through Instagram significantly influences the political participation of Generation Z and first-time voters. However, while previous studies mainly focus on the impact of digital communication on voting behavior, this study extends the discussion by highlighting activists' internal strategies in constructing political messages, including the consideration of audience characteristics and platform dynamics. This perspective shows that digital activism involves a conscious and multi-layered communication process.

In the context of individual activism, the communication strategy of Aulia Thariq Akbar, which emphasizes political education and the development of critical awareness, reinforces the findings of (Putri & Pratiwi, 2022) and (Izzati et al., 2021), who argue that social media can function as a medium for education and deliberative activism. Digital activism in this study is not merely agitational or oriented toward rapid mobilization but is instead focused on issue interpretation and political literacy. This indicates that Generation Z digital activism extends beyond the logic of virality and instant persuasion commonly found in digital electoral campaign studies (Nurussyadah et al., 2025). Instead, it reflects a more deliberative approach that emphasizes political education and gradual awareness-building rather than immediate mobilization.

Meanwhile, the collective and structured communication strategy of BEM SI East Java Region demonstrates similarities with the findings of (Nayiroh & Ema, 2024) and (Dasri, 2025), which highlight the role of social media as a tool for mobilizing social and student movements. However, this study offers a novel contribution by showing that internal consolidation processes prior to content publication function as a narrative control mechanism to maintain the legitimacy of the movement. This process reflects elements of agenda-setting and framing practices, where student organizations collectively determine which issues are prioritized and how they are presented. Thus, social media serves not only as a space for expression but also as an instrument of collective political representation among students.

The adaptation of Generation Z actors to social media algorithms through the regulation of posting schedules, visual formats, and concise language styles reinforces the concept of the mediatization of politics, as also discussed by (Juditha & Darmawan, 2024) and (Sitorus et al., 2024) in the context of political polarization and misinformation. These findings suggest that digital political communication cannot be separated from the technological logic of platforms, resulting in activism strategies that simultaneously consider ideological and technical dimensions.

Regarding digital political mobilization, the findings reveal that Generation Z mobilization is gradual and hybrid, linking online and offline spaces. This finding is consistent with the studies of (Saud et al., 2020) and (Yusuf & Wibowo, 2021), which assert that social media serves as an initial stage for building awareness and solidarity prior to collective action. However, this study adds that individual mobilization tends to take the form of symbolic and discursive micro-activism, whereas student organizational mobilization is more coordinated and structured, as explained in resource mobilization theory (Yusriah & Mujab, 2025).

Audience responses to digital activism in this study indicate that social media functions as a fluid and inclusive digital public sphere. These findings align with (Juleha et al., 2024), (Khatimah et al., 2024), and (Robiyanti et al., 2024), who highlight the growing political participation of Generation Z through online interactions. However, this study further shows that participation does not always appear as formal engagement but often takes the form of light actions such as commenting and resharing content. Such forms of participation reflect the flexible patterns of Generation Z's civic engagement in digital environments.

On the other hand, findings related to hate speech, polarization, and concerns over digital regulation reinforce the results of (Rahmadani et al., 2024) and (Sitorus et al., 2024) regarding the vulnerability of digital public spaces to communicative distortions. This indicates that while social media expands opportunities for participation, digital democracy continues to face significant structural and cultural challenges.

Overall, this discussion confirms that Generation Z digital political activism represents an adaptive form of social movement in response to developments in communication technology and platform-mediated communication. This study highlights how digital activism among Generation Z involves strategic communication practices, gradual patterns of mobilization, and dynamic audience interactions that collectively shape contemporary forms of youth political participation. In this context, social media functions not only as a tool for political communication but also as a space for constructing identity, awareness, and the practice of digital democracy among young citizens. However, this study has several limitations.

The research focuses on a relatively small number of informants consisting of one individual digital activist and several representatives from a student organization in East

Java, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader Generation Z political engagement in other regions of Indonesia. In addition, the study concentrates on a single social media platform, Instagram, whereas other platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube may also play important roles in shaping digital political participation. Therefore, future research is encouraged to involve a more diverse range of participants from different regions and organizational backgrounds, as well as to conduct comparative analyses across multiple social media platforms to better understand how different digital environments influence the strategies and dynamics of Generation Z political activism.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that Generation Z's digital political activism demonstrates contextual, adaptive, and strategic characteristics in response to the development of communication technologies. Social media, particularly Instagram, no longer functions merely as a complement to conventional activism but has become a primary space for political participation among Generation Z. Through social media, both individual activists and student organizations are able to articulate political ideas, build collective awareness, and expand the reach of movements in a more effective and dynamic manner. The communication strategies employed are planned and reflective, involving issue research, language simplification, visual content adaptation, and alignment with platform algorithms, indicating that Generation Z's digital activism prioritizes educational and awareness-building approaches.

Furthermore, this study finds that Generation Z's digital political mobilization occurs in a gradual and hybrid form, linking digital spaces as an initial stage of consolidation with offline actions as follow-up activities. Audiences actively participate through flexible forms of engagement, such as discussions and content sharing, positioning social media as a fluid and inclusive digital public sphere. Nevertheless, digital political activism also faces various challenges, including disinformation, opinion polarization, personal attacks, and concerns regarding digital regulation. Overall, Generation Z's digital political activism represents a dynamic and meaningful socio-political practice, reflecting ongoing negotiations between political idealism, power structures, and the logic of digital platforms within the context of contemporary digital democracy.

Author contributions

The author solely contributed to all stages of this research, including research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation. The author was responsible for developing the research framework, conducting fieldwork, analyzing the data, and writing the final manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research. There are no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the objectivity or integrity of the study.

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