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## The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Behavior among University Students in Makassar

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### Abstract

*In the digital transformation era, social media has become a key arena for political communication and participation, especially among youth. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and X enable rapid and interactive exchanges that shape political awareness and engagement. This study explores the role of social media in influencing the political behavior of university students in Makassar, a city known for its educational and political diversity. Using a mixed-method design, data were collected through surveys of 200 students and in-depth interviews with 20 participants. The analysis employed frequency distribution and thematic interpretation, supported by triangulation for validity. Findings show that 70% of students use social media more than three hours daily, primarily on Instagram and TikTok. These platforms enhance political awareness (70%) and peer discussions (60%), though their impact on political trust is inconsistent. Participation often takes the form of online activism, such as sharing political content (60%) and signing digital petitions (40%), with some extending engagement to voting and rallies. Overall, social media acts as both an empowering and challenging space for democratic participation, highlighting the need for stronger digital literacy to counter misinformation and superficial activism.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of digital transformation, social media has emerged as one of the most influential platforms in shaping political communication and participation worldwide (Supriyanto, 2024). According to Khan (2024) Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), TikTok, and YouTube have altered the way citizens engage with political information, enabling a more direct, rapid, and interactive flow of ideas. This shift has been especially evident among young people, who are increasingly exposed to politics not through traditional media, but through digital interactions (Törnberg, 2022; Pickard, 2022; Torous et al., 2021).

Scholars have argued that social media functions as both an information channel and a participatory arena, where users not only consume but also produce, share, and debate political content (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). The horizontal nature of communication on social media reduces the monopoly of elites and mainstream media, allowing grassroots voices and alternative perspectives to emerge. This

democratization of political discourse, however, is accompanied by challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and echo chambers that influence political behavior in complex ways (Ekici, 2025; Pauline, 2025; Lal, 2024; Rhodes, 2022). Hafel (2023) said that, In the Indonesian context, the rise of social media has significantly reshaped the political landscape. With one of the largest populations of social media users in the world, Indonesia has experienced a surge in digital political campaigns, online activism, and citizen-led political movements. From presidential elections to regional issues, social media platforms have become a battleground for political narratives, with politicians, parties, activists, and ordinary citizens all competing for influence (Kharel, 2024; Kaushik, 2025).

The significance of social media in Indonesia is especially pronounced among university students, who represent a demographic that is both digitally savvy and politically important. As a transitional group between adolescence and adulthood, university students are in the process of developing their political identities, values, and behaviors (Walker & Iverson, 2016; Sugimura et al., 2023; Zainurin et al., 2024). Their heavy reliance on social media for information and interaction places them at the forefront of digital political participation.

In Makassar, the capital city of South Sulawesi, this dynamic is particularly relevant. The city is not only a center of higher education with multiple universities but also a hub of cultural and political diversity (Patton, 2023). University students in Makassar are highly engaged with social media platforms, which they use not only for personal networking but also for accessing political news, following leaders, and participating in debates. This makes them an important case study for understanding how digital media affects political behavior in urban Indonesian contexts (Suwana, 2018; Saud & Margono, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2025).

Political behavior among university students can be defined broadly to include political awareness, attitudes, decision-making processes, participation in campaigns, and even voting behaviour (Pritzker et al., 2022; Badaru & Adu, 2021; Zainurin et al., 2024). Social media plays a pivotal role in all of these dimensions by exposing students to political issues, shaping their perceptions, and motivating them toward action. The nature of this influence, however, can vary depending on factors such as the type of platform used, the credibility of information, peer influence, and students' critical thinking skills (Almulla & Al-Rahmi, 2023; Ekahitanond, 2013; Marttunen et al., 2021).

At the same time, the discussions about the negative impact of social media on political activity are growing. The rapid spread of hoaxes, disinformation, and propaganda has the chance of skewing the understanding by students of the political reality. In addition, the so-called clicktivism or slacktivism raises a question whether offline political action can be converted into online re-activity. The conflict between the excitement of digital engagement and the corresponding dangers of manipulation is a controversial theme in the scholarly and policy circles.

Despite these, the fact that social media provides the platforms to boost democratic participation among young people is beyond debate (Sloam, 2014). It allows the university students in Makassar to participatively engage in political life instead of viewing it passively. The platforms provide the platforms to learn, discuss, and organize over the issues that touch their lives and desires. In turn, social media is not only a communication tool but the key component of the development of political culture.

Most of the previous empirical studies on social media and political behavior in Indonesia focused on the politics at the national level or electoral politics in the largest cities, like Jakarta (Purwanto et al., 2020; Guridno, 2024; Saraswati, 2016). However, limited literature is available that focuses on the impact of social media on

the political behavior of university students in the regional urban centers like Makassar. Research in this context can help shed light on the role of local social, cultural, and educational determinants to mediate the effects of digital platforms in political behavior (Chan et al., 2017).

To this end, the aim of this study is to review the effect on social media on political behavior among Makassar based university students. The research aims to add to the subtle insight into the interplay between digital media and youth political behaviour by examining their media use patterns, political attitudes and participatory behaviours. This question is relevant not just as an academic question but also as a question that can guide policy-makers, educators and politically interested actors who strive to build an informed, critical and participatory democratic society.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This research will use a qualitative-quantitative mixed-methodology as a holistic way of analyzing the impact of social media on influencing the political behavior of university students in Makassar. The quantitative aspect addresses tendencies of social media usage, the degree of political awareness, and participation types with the help of structured questionnaires. At the same time, the qualitative aspect examines the definitions, experiences, and perceptions of the students in relation to the political content and its impact on the attitudes and activities. The reason behind this combination is that it does not only give quantifiable information but also reflects the intricacy and nuances of the political behaviors in online settings.

### **Population and Sample**

The target population will be university students in Makassar, which will be based on a wide range of study programs and academic levels. A purposive sampling technique was used to come up with the sample that included the active social media users whose interest or activity involved political discussions or exposure. Two hundred respondents were involved in the survey, whereas 20 respondents were chosen in in-depth interviews. This would guarantee the coverage of both the breadth (general trends) and depth (personal insights) of the power of social media.

### **Data Collection**

Two primary sources were used to gather data. To collect quantitative data related to the length of use and preferred platforms of social media, exposure to political content, and types of participation, a structured questionnaire survey was distributed online and offline. Second, selected students were interviewed semi-structured to discuss their perceptions, motivations and thoughts on how social media influences their political thought processes and actions. Also, the analysis of documents of digital campaigns, hashtags, and political posts on such platforms as Instagram and Twitter was also involved to contribute to the contextual knowledge.

### **Data Analysis**

The convergent mixed-method approach was applied in the data analysis. Statistical analysis of quantitative survey data were presented in frequencies, percentages, and comparative patterns, thus summed up in tables. The thematic analysis was used to process qualitative interview data, and the recurring themes included awareness-building, misinformation, online activism, and trust in politics. These two groups of results were combined in order to come up with in-depth conclusions, where the numerical patterns were accompanied by explanations using the context.

In order to ensure validity, the study resorted to a triangulation of the data sources, the cross-checking of the results of surveys, interviews and document analysis. To avoid the issue of reliability, they organized a pilot test of the questionnaire and ensured a transparent coding system during thematic analysis. Further verification of interpretation by other researchers also enhanced accuracy of interpretation. The ethical considerations were observed by the fact that informed consent of all participants was obtained and they were made anonymous.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Social Media Usage Patterns among University Students

The first finding relates to the frequency and purpose of social media usage among university students in Makassar. Data shows that students spend significant time online, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter (X). These platforms are not only used for personal communication but also function as channels for accessing political news and information.

The intensity of usage reflects how embedded social media has become in students' daily routines. Most respondents indicated that they check their accounts multiple times a day, often receiving political updates in real time. This constant connectivity influences the immediacy of their responses to political issues and discussions.

This pattern highlights that social media is more than entertainment—it is a central mechanism of political socialization. The results also suggest that exposure to political content is less about deliberate search and more about incidental encounters through feeds, groups, and trending posts.

Table 1. Frequency of Social Media Use for Political Information (N = 200)

Frequency of Use	Percentage (%)
More than 5 hours/day	30
3–5 hours/day	40
1–2 hours/day	20
Less than 1 hour/day	10

These findings suggest that the majority (70%) of students use social media at least 3 hours daily, creating substantial opportunities for political exposure.

### Platforms Preferred for Political Information

The second finding concerns which platforms students prefer when engaging with political issues. While Instagram and TikTok are dominant for quick and visually engaging content, Twitter (X) remains an important platform for discussions and trending political debates. WhatsApp is widely used for sharing news articles and engaging in group discussions, especially within student organizations.

The diversity of platforms shows that students use different media for different purposes short videos for awareness, discussions on Twitter for opinion formation, and WhatsApp groups for in-depth deliberations. This multi-platform usage illustrates the complexity of digital political engagement among youth. Importantly, the reliance on visually oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok suggests that political communication targeting students needs to be concise, creative, and visually engaging to have an impact.

Table 2. Preferred Social Media Platforms for Political Content (N = 200)

Platform	Percentage (%)	Primary Use
Instagram	35	Infographics, stories, reels
WhatsApp	25	Group discussions, article sharing
TikTok	20	Short videos, campaigns, political humor

Twitter (X)	15	Trending debates, opinion expression
Facebook	5	News sharing, older student communities

These results underline the importance of platform-specific strategies for political outreach and confirm that younger generations prefer dynamic, interactive media for political communication.

### Impact of Social Media on Political Attitudes

The third finding evaluates how social media affects students' political attitudes, such as awareness, interest, and trust. Respondents reported that social media increased their awareness of political events, encouraged them to discuss politics with peers, and influenced their opinions about candidates or government policies.

Interestingly, while many students acknowledged that social media had broadened their political horizons, they also expressed concerns about misinformation. This dual effect positive influence alongside skepticism demonstrates the complexity of political engagement in the digital age.

The findings suggest that while social media is an effective tool for raising awareness, it does not always guarantee trust in political systems. Students often differentiate between the information they consume and the reliability of political institutions.

Table 3. Reported Impact of Social Media on Political Attitudes (N = 200)

Impact Area	Positive Influence (%)	Negative Influence (%)
Increased political awareness	70	10
Encouraged peer discussions	60	15
Shaped voting preferences	45	25
Increased political trust	35	30

From these findings, it is evident that while awareness and discussions are largely positive, the influence on trust and voting behavior is mixed, showing students' critical stance toward political information.

### Political Participation Linked to Social Media

The final result focuses on how social media use translates into political participation, both online and offline. The study shows that many students engage in digital participation such as sharing posts, joining online petitions, or commenting on political issues. A smaller proportion extends this participation into offline activities, such as attending rallies, voting, or joining student organizations.

This finding emphasizes that while social media is a gateway to political participation, it is often limited to online activism rather than direct involvement in political processes. However, online activities should not be underestimated, as they contribute significantly to agenda-setting and awareness-building. Moreover, students who are highly active on social media tend to be more likely to also engage offline, indicating a positive relationship between digital and traditional forms of political participation.

Table 4. Forms of Political Participation Influenced by Social Media (N = 200)

Type of Participation	Percentage (%)	Examples
Sharing/liking content	60	Reposting political memes/posts
Online petitions/campaigns	40	Hashtag movements, petitions
Voting behavior	35	Choosing candidates based on media
Attending rallies/events	20	Student protests, campaign events

Joining organizations	15	Campus-based political groups
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The data demonstrates that online activism dominates, but offline involvement is still present. This reflects the hybrid nature of political engagement among students in Makassar.

### **Social Media as a Central Arena of Political Socialization**

The findings show that the majority of university students in Makassar spend more than three hours per day on social media, with a significant proportion exceeding five hours daily. This intensity of usage makes social media the most accessible and frequent source of political information. Unlike traditional media such as newspapers or television, social media provides immediacy, interactivity, and personalized political exposure through algorithmic feeds. In this sense, social media functions not only as a tool of entertainment but also as a primary arena of political socialization where students encounter news, debates, and campaigns sometimes intentionally, but often incidentally.

The dominance of this exposure means that political learning is increasingly informal and embedded in everyday digital interactions. Students are not passively consuming information but engaging in a continuous process of negotiation, where likes, comments, and shares reinforce political conversations in peer networks. This supports theories of digital citizenship, which argue that online spaces now significantly shape young people's understanding of political life.

### **Platform Preferences and Their Implications**

The data indicate that Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Twitter (X) are the leading platforms for accessing political content, but each serves a different role in students' political engagement. Instagram and TikTok dominate because of their visual, interactive formats, which allow political messages to be consumed quickly and memorably. Twitter, though less popular, remains a key platform for political debate and opinion formation, while WhatsApp serves as an intimate network for in-depth sharing and discussion among peers and student groups.

This differentiation in platform use has important implications. Political actors, including parties, candidates, and activists, must adopt platform-specific communication strategies to reach students effectively. For instance, creative visuals and short videos may work well on TikTok and Instagram, while analytical debates are better suited for Twitter. WhatsApp groups, meanwhile, demonstrate how political information circulates in more controlled and trusted micro-communities. This confirms that political communication among students in Makassar is multi-layered and adaptive.

### **Influence on Political Attitudes and Awareness**

One of the strongest results of this research is the significant role that social media plays in raising political awareness and stimulating peer discussions. A striking 70% of respondents reported an increase in their awareness of political issues due to social media exposure, while 60% stated that social media encouraged them to engage in political discussions with friends. These findings emphasize the growing influence of digital platforms in fostering political consciousness, particularly among young people who are often considered politically apathetic. The ability of social media to break down barriers to information and facilitate discussions on political topics represents a major shift in how younger generations interact with political issues, which were traditionally shaped by more formal sources like newspapers, television, and political parties.

However, the effects of social media on political awareness are not one-dimensional. While many students acknowledge its positive influence in shaping their political

views, there is also widespread concern regarding the prevalence of misinformation, propaganda, and the risk of manipulation. This dual effect of social media reflects the ambivalent nature of political communication in digital spaces. On one hand, social media can democratize access to information by providing a platform for diverse voices, enabling users to encounter a variety of perspectives. On the other hand, it can also exacerbate issues like polarization, spread false information, and fuel distrust in political institutions and processes. The mixed responses regarding political trust where 35% reported an increase in trust, while 30% reported a decrease clearly illustrate this paradox. These findings suggest that while social media offers new opportunities for engagement, it also poses significant challenges in terms of misinformation and political fragmentation.

### **Political Participation in the Digital Age**

The research findings also reveal a complex relationship between social media usage and political participation among students. Political engagement is strongly mediated by online activism, with the most common forms of participation being sharing or liking political content (60%) and joining online campaigns or petitions (40%). Although offline political participation, such as attending rallies or joining political organizations, remains less frequent, there is a notable correlation between online and offline political activities. Students who are highly engaged in online activism are more likely to participate in offline political actions, suggesting that digital activism serves as a gateway to deeper forms of involvement. This reinforces the idea that online engagement should not be dismissed as mere “clicktivism” or superficial participation, as it can act as an entry point to more tangible forms of political involvement.

Social media, by lowering the barriers to participation, offers more students an opportunity to engage with political issues, even if their involvement is largely symbolic. Over time, these symbolic actions, such as liking posts or signing online petitions, can serve to normalize political discussion and influence voting behavior. For example, 35% of respondents reported that their voting preferences were influenced by content they encountered on social media. This demonstrates that social media has a tangible impact on democratic processes, even among those who may not be actively participating in more traditional forms of political engagement.

### **The Broader Significance for Youth Political Culture**

Taken together, these findings underscore the central role of social media in shaping how university students in Makassar construct their political identities and behaviors. Social media serves as both a site of empowerment and a site of contestation. On one hand, it enhances political awareness, fosters dialogue, and encourages new forms of participation that are more accessible and inclusive. On the other hand, it exposes students to the risks of misinformation, shallow engagement, and political polarization. This duality reflects the complexity of social media’s role in modern political cultures.

Therefore, the role of social media in shaping political behavior should not be viewed in purely positive or negative terms. It is best understood as a double-edged tool whose influence is determined by various factors, including the quality of the information being shared, the digital literacy of the users, and the broader political environment in which social media operates. In this sense, social media not only reflects existing political cultures among students but also actively reshapes them, offering both opportunities and challenges for political engagement. As a result, the growing importance of digital literacy and critical thinking becomes clear. It is essential that higher education institutions foster these skills among students to help them navigate the complexities of digital political communication, ensuring that they are equipped to engage with political content in a responsible, informed, and

critical manner. The future of political participation in the digital age will depend largely on how students are trained to discern credible sources, engage in thoughtful dialogue, and actively contribute to the democratic process both online and offline.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research conclude that social media plays a significant role in shaping the political behavior of university students in Makassar, both as a source of political information and as a platform for engagement. The results show that students actively use platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok not only for entertainment but also to follow political discussions, campaigns, and debates. Exposure to political content on these platforms increases students' awareness and encourages them to express opinions, participate in online activism, and even influence offline political actions such as joining discussions or supporting certain movements. However, the study also highlights challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the risk of superficial engagement, where political participation is limited to likes, shares, or reposts without deeper involvement. Overall, social media has become a double-edged tool that, when used critically, can strengthen political literacy and democratic participation among youth.

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