

Platformized Youth Engagement: Institutional Political Communication on Instagram in Indonesia's 2024 Election

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ABSTRAK

Platformisasi komunikasi politik telah mengubah secara mendasar cara lembaga penyelenggara pemilu menjangkau pemilih muda, namun bagaimana institusi negara secara strategis mengonstruksi keterlibatan politik Generasi Z dalam ruang publik yang terplatformisasi masih belum dipahami secara memadai. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana Komisi Pemilihan Umum Republik Indonesia (KPU RI) mengonstruksi keterlibatan politik pemilih pemula Generasi Z melalui Instagram selama Pemilihan Umum 2024, serta mengidentifikasi mekanisme keterlibatan yang dihasilkan dari beragam logika konten institusional. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode analisis isi terarah terhadap unggahan Instagram KPU RI periode 18 Desember 2023 sampai 18 Februari 2024, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan kerangka Four Pillars of Social Media Strategy dan model Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa KPU RI menerapkan strategi konten multidimensional—edukatif, hiburan, kolaboratif, dan partisipatif—yang memicu beragam mekanisme keterlibatan, mulai dari legitimasi sipil rasional hingga partisipasi afektif dan performatif. Keterlibatan yang terbentuk cenderung berupa visibilitas simbolik dan ekspresi diri, selaras dengan praktik media digital Generasi Z, namun tidak berkorelasi langsung dengan perilaku elektoral. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada kajian komunikasi politik dengan mengungkap mekanisme simbolik yang menghubungkan desain konten institusional dengan respons Generasi Z, sekaligus mengisi kesenjangan riset pada konteks demokrasi non-Barat yang terplatformisasi.

Kata-kata Kunci: komunikasi politik; Instagram; Generasi Z; platformisasi; KPU RI

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive platformization of political communication has substantially transformed the strategies of electoral bodies in reaching young voters, yet how state institutions strategically construct Generation Z's political engagement within a platform-mediated public sphere remains insufficiently understood. This study aims to analyze how Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU RI) constructs political engagement among first-time Generation Z voters through Instagram during the 2024 national election, and to identify the engagement mechanisms activated by distinct institutional content logics. Employing directed qualitative content analysis of KPU RI's official Instagram posts from 18 December 2023 to 18 February 2024, this research integrates the Four Pillars of Social Media Strategy framework with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model. Findings reveal that KPU RI deployed a multifaceted content strategy—educational, entertainment, collaborative, and participatory—triggering engagement mechanisms ranging from rational civic legitimacy to affective and performative participation. The resulting engagement tends to manifest as symbolic visibility and expressive involvement congruent with Gen Z's digital media practices, rather than as a direct antecedent to electoral behavior. This research contributes to political communication scholarship by illuminating the symbolic mechanisms linking institutional content design to Generation Z's engagement responses, while addressing a critical gap in research on non-Western platformized democratic contexts.

Keywords: political communication; Instagram; Generation Z; platformization; KPU RI

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INTRODUCTION

The platformization of political communication has fundamentally reshaped how democratic institutions engage with citizens, particularly young voters. Platforms such as Instagram have evolved from mere information conduits into critical infrastructures for the construction of political meaning and civic identity through platform-specific affordances (van Dijck et al., 2018; Helmond, 2015). For Generation Z, whose political socialization is embedded in algorithmically curated, visually driven environments, engagement is increasingly mediated by platform logics rather than by conventional civic institutions (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). This shift poses a fundamental challenge to electoral management bodies, whose mandate extends beyond information dissemination to the active cultivation of democratic legitimacy.

Research consistently shows that young voters respond less to hierarchical, top-down messaging and more to content that is visually compelling, interactive, and culturally resonant (Loader et al., 2014; Vromen et al., 2016). Within social media ecosystems, affective expression and performative visibility have displaced deliberative engagement as the dominant modes of political involvement (Papacharissi, 2015; Theocharis et al., 2015). These dynamics compel electoral management bodies to recalibrate their democratic communication strategies, a transition fraught with normative tensions between institutional authority

and participatory appeal (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018).

Despite growing institutional reliance on Instagram for political outreach, two critical gaps persist in the literature. First, existing scholarship focuses predominantly on political parties, candidates, and individual actors; the communicative strategies of state electoral institutions, whose mandate is distinctly non-partisan and procedural, remain comparatively under-examined (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Mergel, 2013). Second, research on platform-based political communication is overwhelmingly Western-centric, leaving substantial theoretical blind spots regarding non-Western democratic contexts. Indonesia, with over two hundred million internet users, high Instagram penetration among youth, and Generation Z comprising more than half of the 2024 permanent voters' list, represents a strategically significant yet underrepresented empirical case. Furthermore, most existing studies evaluate communicative effectiveness through surface metrics such as likes and shares, without interrogating the underlying content logics and engagement mechanisms that drive these interactions (Boulianne, 2015).

To address these gaps, the present study examines how KPU RI strategically deployed Instagram to construct political engagement among first-time Generation Z voters during the 2024 general election. The study's novelty lies in its dual-framework integration: the Four Pillars of Social Media Strategy maps institutional content

rationales, while the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model traces the engagement mechanisms these rationales activate. Applying this combined analytical lens to a state electoral institution in a non-Western democratic context constitutes a theoretically grounded and empirically distinct contribution to platform politics research.

Three research questions guide this investigation: (1) How does KPU RI leverage Instagram’s platform affordances to construct political engagement among first-time Generation Z voters? (2) In what ways do distinct content logics activate differential stimulus–response mechanisms within institutional political communication? (3) What do these communicative practices reveal about the transformation of electoral management bodies within a platformized public sphere? By addressing these questions, this paper contributes to international scholarly discourse on political communication, youth participation, and platform governance in contemporary democracies, with particular attention to the underrepresented Southeast Asian context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach using directed qualitative content analysis to examine the construction of youth political engagement in institutional political communication on Instagram. Directed qualitative content analysis is selected because it is well suited

to theory-driven research, enabling the systematic interpretation of empirical data through established conceptual frameworks while remaining open to analytical perspectives that emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2018). In contrast to approaches that rely solely on quantitative engagement metrics to measure communicative effectiveness, this study emphasizes the disclosure of communicative logics and meaning-making mechanisms within institutional social media discourse, in line with the interpretive methodological tradition in political communication studies (Chadwick, 2017).

This research is framed by a dual theoretical approach. First, the Four Pillars of Social Media Strategy framework, encompassing communication, education, entertainment, and collaboration, serves as an analytical device for identifying the dominant rationales behind institutional content. Within this research, the four pillars are treated not only as content-classification categories but also as strategic methodologies through which electoral bodies define political engagement and civic responsibility on digital platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kreiss, 2016). Second, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) model is used to examine how Instagram content is designed to trigger user interaction. In this context, the stimulus refers to platform-specific attributes such as visual aesthetics, linguistic style, and interactive elements; the organism refers to the patterns of media consumption and interpretive frameworks assumed to be held by Generation Z

users; and the response refers to symbolic and performative forms of engagement, such as content visibility, calls for participation, and emotional feedback (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

The empirical data consist of Instagram posts from KPU RI's official account (@kpu_ri) during the election communication period from 18 December 2023 to 18 February 2024, capturing the final campaign period, the quiet week, election day, and the immediate post-election window. From the total corpus of posts within this period, purposive sampling was applied to isolate high-engagement content. Operationally, a post was classified as "high engagement" if its total interaction count (sum of likes, comments, and shares) equaled or exceeded the account's mean engagement per post plus one standard deviation ($M + 1SD$) for the observation period, placing it approximately in the top 25th percentile of all posts by engagement volume. This criterion yielded a purposive sample of posts that represent the most algorithmically amplified and audience-responsive content within the observation window, consistent with research on algorithmic amplification and interaction dynamics in political social media discourse (Bucher, 2012; Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

The principal unit of analysis is the individual Instagram post, understood as a multimodal artifact comprising its visual components (images or video), accompanying caption text, hashtags employed, and explicit engagement prompts such as calls to participate or requests to share. This

integrated conceptualization aligns with scholarly perspectives asserting that meaning-making on visual social media platforms arises from the interplay of multimodal components, rather than from isolated message fragments (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Kress, 2010).

Data analysis proceeded through a systematic, multi-stage coding procedure. In the initial stage, open coding was applied to identify platform affordances and key communicative elements such as visual design, narrative voice, the use of casual language, and explicit calls to participate. Next, axial coding was performed to categorize posts according to dominant content rationales consistent with the Four Pillars framework. Finally, interpretive coding was applied using the SOR framework to deconstruct how particular stimuli were strategically engineered to evoke targeted engagement behaviors among Generation Z users. This iterative and reflexive analytical approach accords with established principles of qualitative content analysis, thereby ensuring both analytical rigor and theoretical integration (Saldaña, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure analytical trustworthiness, this study prioritizes congruence among theoretical constructs, coding procedures, and interpretive conclusions. Coding reliability was assessed through an intercoder agreement procedure: 20% of the sampled posts were independently coded by a second researcher using the same coding scheme. Cohen's Kappa yielded $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating strong intercoder agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Remaining coding discrepancies were resolved through deliberative consensus between both coders. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis, documenting all coding decisions, category definitions, and interpretive revisions at each stage to ensure transparency and analytical accountability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While statistical generalization is not pursued, the study strives for analytical generalization by integrating empirical findings with established theories of political discourse and platform dynamics (Yin, 2018). Reflexivity was maintained through critical examination of the researcher's interpretive role and by grounding every claim in observable content features rather than assumed behavioral outcomes. Ethical principles were observed by analyzing only publicly available content from an official organizational account, in line with ethical guidelines for digital research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This study is bounded by its focus on a single platform and institution, precluding cross-platform and cross-institutional comparisons, and does not directly measure the impact of institutional communication on electoral behavior.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Analysis of the corpus of @kpu_ri Instagram posts during the period from 18 December 2023 to 18 February 2024 indicates that KPU RI strategically deployed distinct content logics to construct political engagement among Generation

Z. Rather than treating Instagram as a neutral communicative instrument or a mere distribution channel, this analysis approaches platform engagement as a communicative construct shaped by institutional content logics and platform affordances. The findings show that KPU RI applied four dominant content approaches, educational, entertainment, collaborative, and participatory, each designed to trigger specific engagement mechanisms among young voters. Each approach builds upon a distinct assumption about who Generation Z voters are, how they consume political information, and what kinds of engagement are expected to emerge as a response.

Educational content constitutes the primary communicative framework within KPU RI's Instagram strategy. Posts in this category effectively distill complex electoral processes, budget disclosures, and voting procedures into easily digestible visual infographics and short explanatory videos, typically under one minute in length. From the perspective of the Stimulus–Organism–Response model, the stimulus is characterized by design elements that prioritize clarity, the use of formal yet accessible language, and an informational framing strategy. Such stimuli are directed at a Generation Z demographic that values transparency, operational efficiency, and visual legibility, characteristics that align with prior research on youth information-seeking behavior in digital environments (Boulianne, 2015; Vromen et al., 2016).

The organismic response evoked by educational content extends beyond mere assimilation of information and contributes to the formation of civic rationality, the conceptualization of engagement as a conscious and informed act. This finding resonates with arguments that institutional social media communication often serves to bolster authority by recontextualizing bureaucratic procedures as accessible and intelligible to the public (Mergel, 2013; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). User engagement, however, tends to manifest predominantly in symbolic forms, primarily through visibility metrics and expressions of affirmation such as thumbs-up emoji, rather than through substantive deliberative interaction in the comment sections. This observation suggests that while educational content reinforces institutional legitimacy, it does not invariably foster deep participatory discourse, thereby echoing broader critiques of civic education mediated by digital platforms (Papacharissi, 2015).

Furthermore, KPU RI's educational content exhibits a visualization strategy that conforms to the platform's aesthetic conventions: a color palette consistent with the institution's identity, the use of youth-friendly iconography, and infographic layouts designed for vertical reading on mobile screens. This strategy reflects KPU RI's effort to align its institutional image with contemporary digital aesthetics, so that state authority is rendered in a visual idiom familiar to young users. In other words, educational content does not merely transfer

information; it also performs symbolic work by modernizing the institution's image and positioning KPU RI as an institutional actor that is responsive to digital culture.

Entertainment content operates according to a distinct communicative paradigm. Posts of this kind employ casual language, humor, trending audio tracks, and culturally relevant references to integrate electoral messages with prevailing digital cultural norms. Several posts use the Reels format with audio clips that are currently popular on TikTok, while others adopt a meme-like approach featuring animated characters that encourage voters to come to polling stations in a playful tone. Within the SOR framework, the stimulus prioritizes affective markers and entertainment value, presupposing a Generation Z demographic familiar with meme culture and concise audiovisual narratives (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

As a consequence, the response that emerges takes the form of affective engagement, marked by likes, shares, and comments that signify emotional resonance and cultural affiliation. This finding corroborates studies of affective publics, which argue that political discourse on social media gains traction through emotional appeals rather than through reasoned debate (Papacharissi, 2015). While entertainment content significantly enhances visibility and message circulation, this strategy risks depoliticizing civic engagement by representing voting as a fleeting lifestyle event rather than as a substantive civic duty. This inherent tension reflects a key challenge within

digital political discourse: the trade-off between engagement metrics and meaningful political understanding (Theocharis et al., 2015). Put differently, entertainment content is successful in capturing attention, but the extent to which it converts that attention into political literacy remains an open question.

Collaborative posts, particularly those produced through partnerships with oversight bodies such as the Election Supervisory Agency (Badan Pengawas Pemilu/Bawaslu) and relevant ministries, reflect a communicative paradigm grounded in networked trust. Such contributions conceptualize electoral integrity as a collective institutional obligation, emphasizing principles of transparency, accountability, and cross-institutional oversight. The underlying stimulus takes the form of a combination of authoritative statements and inter-institutional validation, presupposing a young audience that is critical yet generally inclined to trust institutions, and attentive to questions of fairness and due process (Loader et al., 2014).

The engagement generated by collaborative content is characterized by trust-centered interaction, visible in comments and expressions of support for the credibility of the institutions involved. This resonates with research on connective action, which argues that trust in political mechanisms is increasingly built through visible, mutually reinforcing networks rather than through singular figures of authority (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Nevertheless, this form of

engagement is bounded by institutional framing, so that the space for grassroots involvement remains limited. Institutional collaboration strengthens perceived legitimacy without meaningfully redistributing communicative power to the public. In effect, audiences are invited to acknowledge the validity of the process rather than to participate in redefining it.

Participatory communication strategically invites users to become involved—for example, by asking them to share post-voting experiences, upload photos of their inked fingers, or share celebratory media using official hashtags such as #PemiluDamai2024 and #AkuMemilih. Within the SOR framework, the primary stimulus is participatory markers and symbolic validation, premised on the assumption that Generation Z privileges online visibility and personal expression within digitally connected communities (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020). The resulting response takes the form of performative engagement, the enactment of political involvement through self-presentation rather than through substantive policy discourse.

This pattern resonates with scholarly arguments that platform-based participation often prioritizes symbolic integration over meaningful policy impact (Bossetta, 2018). While these methods successfully cultivate a sense of community and civic enthusiasm among young voters, they also risk reducing participation to mere expressive gestures disconnected from decision-making authority. As a result, electoral

involvement, however celebratory it may appear on Instagram, can be substantively shallow: young voters may feel 'connected' to the democratic process without actually understanding the policies being contested or the consequences of their choices.

In addition, this pattern of participation reveals how Instagram's affordances, particularly Stories, hashtags, and mentions, enable the institution to aggregate individual expressions into a collective narrative. User posts employing official hashtags are subsequently selected and reposted by KPU RI, creating a feedback loop in which individual participation is publicly validated by the institution. This loop reinforces a sense of symbolic inclusion but simultaneously reveals how the narrative of engagement remains curated from above rather than generated spontaneously from below.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that KPU RI's strategic use of Instagram reflects broader shifts in institutional political communication within a public sphere increasingly shaped by digital platforms. Electoral management bodies no longer function merely as channels for disseminating information; they also act as curators of audience interaction, capable of integrating civic messages with the platform's inherent dynamics of visibility, emotional resonance, and participatory mechanisms. This finding aligns with prior scholarship arguing that digital environments compel institutions to reorient their democratic

communication strategies toward approaches that are attention-oriented and culturally integrated (van Dijck et al., 2018; Chadwick, 2017).

More importantly, this research shows that the political engagement of Generation Z is predominantly constructed as symbolic and performative, rather than as a deliberative process. While this form of engagement has the potential to broaden inclusivity and lower barriers to participation, it simultaneously raises normative questions about the depth and substantive quality of democratic involvement. In other words, when thousands of young voters share photos of their inked fingers on election day, can this act be regarded as meaningful democratic participation, or merely as a form of identity expression that happens to intersect with a political event? These findings challenge optimistic narratives about social media-enabled youth political participation, indicating that high levels of engagement do not automatically translate into stronger democratic agency.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research extends political communication scholarship by showing how institutional actors strategically mobilize content logics to negotiate the inherent tension between established authority and citizen participation in digital arenas. KPU RI is shown not merely to deliver electoral information but to actively shape how political engagement itself is imagined, understood, and performed by young citizens. The pairing of the Four Pillars framework with the SOR model proves productive as an

analytical device because it enables the researcher to look beyond engagement metrics and trace the symbolic mechanisms that connect content design to users' subjective experiences. By positioning Instagram affordances as stimuli that shape the organismic dispositions of Generation Z, this analysis successfully reveals that the effects of political communication reside not only in the content of messages but also in the platform infrastructures through which those messages circulate.

Empirically, this study contributes to scholarly discourse by offering evidence from a non-Western democratic context, thereby addressing the Western-centric bias that continues to dominate research on platform politics and youth engagement. Most research on digital political communication originates from the United States and Europe, so research on Indonesia offers a much-needed perspective on how platformization dynamics operate within a pluralistic democracy that has a large youth population, extensive cultural diversity, and rapidly developing digital infrastructure. Indonesia, with more than two hundred million internet users and a high rate of Instagram penetration among its youth, represents an important empirical laboratory for understanding the relationship between platformization and democracy.

Moreover, the findings of this study reinforce the thesis that the platformization of political communication is not simply a change of channel but a fundamental transformation in the way

democratic institutions operate. When KPU RI chooses to communicate electoral information via Instagram, it does not merely transfer existing content to a new medium; it must also adopt the logic of that medium, including visual logic, affective logic, algorithmic logic, and the logic of performative participation. The adoption of these logics carries consequences: the institution is compelled to strike a compromise between the need to maintain its formal authority and the imperative to appear 'relatable' and approachable to young audiences. The result is a hybridization of institutional communication, a fusion of bureaucratic formality with digital culture that is clearly reflected in the diversity of content analyzed in this study.

This hybridization raises important questions about the boundaries between civic education and political marketing. When KPU RI employs meme formats or viral audio to promote an election, is it still carrying out its civic education function, or has it shifted toward becoming an actor that 'sells' the election as a cultural product? This question is not easy to answer because in the digital era, education and marketing can no longer be cleanly separated. Nevertheless, the question is important to raise because it concerns institutional legitimacy: to what extent can KPU RI adopt platform logics without compromising its credibility as a neutral body expected to stand above all political interests?

This research also highlights the asymmetry in the attention economy faced by electoral management bodies. Instagram, as a commercial

platform, is designed to maximize user engagement through algorithms that prioritize content with high entertainment value. Within such an environment, serious and procedural educational content will struggle to compete with entertainment content produced either by individual creators or by political actors who are less constrained by norms of neutrality. Consequently, KPU RI must continually adjust to algorithmic logic to keep its messages visible. Such adjustments, while necessary for communicative effectiveness, also carry the risk of gradually eroding the institutional character that distinguishes state bodies from commercial actors.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings enrich the conceptualization of the Habermasian public sphere in the digital era. The public sphere envisioned by Habermas—as an arena of rational deliberation among citizens—undergoes significant transformation on platforms such as Instagram, where deliberation is often replaced by visual expression, and rationality is often eclipsed by affectivity. This does not necessarily mean that the digital public sphere is normatively inferior; it simply operates under a different logic and therefore requires a different normative framework. This study contributes to that discussion by showing that institutions such as KPU RI are compelled to operate within this new logic, and that their adaptation is not value-neutral: every strategic communication choice carries normative consequences for the forms of

engagement that are enabled and the modes of political subjectivity that are produced.

Although this study is limited to a single platform and a single institutional entity, its findings underscore the importance of future research employing comparative, cross-platform, and mixed-methods approaches to investigate the relationship between digitally mediated engagement and political behavior beyond social media, as well as its broader democratic implications. Future research could compare KPU RI's strategies with those of electoral management bodies in other countries, or examine how KPU RI uses TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, in order to map how different platform affordances produce different forms of engagement. In addition, ethnographic research or in-depth interviews with young voters would complement this analysis by providing insight into how institutional content is actually received, interpreted, and negotiated in audiences' everyday lives.

As an analytical conclusion, this research affirms that the principal challenge facing electoral management bodies in the digital era is not merely the generation of engagement, but the cultivation of participatory forms that transcend performative visibility and move toward more substantive democratic involvement. This requires a more reflective approach to platform-based communication that recognizes the value of symbolic engagement while critically questioning its structural limitations. Accordingly, the

analytical framework developed in this study can serve as a foundation for future research to critically evaluate not only the extent to which young citizens engage with political content, but also the structural, mediational, and constraining factors embedded in platform-shaped institutional communication.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the construction of youth political engagement within a platformized public sphere by an electoral management body, focusing on the Indonesian General Election Commission's (KPU RI) use of Instagram during the 2024 general election. In contrast to conceptions that treat social media as a neutral communicative instrument, the findings demonstrate that Instagram functions as an infrastructural arena in which civic participation is symbolically generated through platform affordances and institutional content strategies. The deployment of educational, entertainment, collaborative, and participatory content logics serves not only as a means of disseminating information but also as an active influence on how Generation Z perceives, interprets, and enacts political engagement within digital contexts. The engagement produced by these strategies tends to take the form of symbolic visibility, affective resonance, and performative expression, rather than deliberation oriented toward policy substance. The principal contribution of this study lies in its integration of the Four Pillars of Social Media

Strategy with the Stimulus–Organism–Response model, enabling a systematic analysis of the mechanisms through which political engagement is constructed on the platform, while highlighting a structural disjunction between platform-driven visibility and the quality of engagement within institutional political discourse.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged: its focus on a single platform (Instagram), a single institution (KPU RI), and a relatively brief time period, such that the findings cannot be directly generalized to other contexts. In addition, this study does not empirically measure the direct impact of institutional communication on electoral behavior. For the further development of this line of research, it is recommended that future studies adopt comparative approaches across platforms and countries, combine content analysis with quantitative methods such as voter behavior surveys, and complement textual analysis with digital ethnographic research that explores how young voters actually receive and respond to institutional content in their everyday lives. Such research would deepen our understanding of the extent to which platform-based engagement can contribute to the development of a more substantive democratic culture among younger generations.

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