

DYNAMICS OF GEN Z POLITICAL PREFERENCES: THE ROLE OF E-WOM, DIGITAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, AND POLITICAL LITERACY IN EAST KALIMANTAN

Moh. Reza Munandar¹, Saida Zainurossalamia², Heni Rahayu Rahmawati³

^{1,2,3} Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business

Universitas Mulawarman, Samarinda, Kalimantan Timur, Indonesia

Email: munandarrezal7@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study investigates the mechanism underlying the formation of political preferences among Generation Z in East Kalimantan within an increasingly digital political environment. The transformation toward platform-based political communication has intensified the role of user-generated information and online interaction in shaping political orientation. This research aims to examine the effects of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and digital political engagement on political preferences, while positioning political literacy as a moderating variable that conditions these relationships. A quantitative approach was employed using survey data collected from Generation Z respondents in East Kalimantan. The analysis applied Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to evaluate both direct and moderating effects among variables. The findings indicate that e-WOM and digital political engagement significantly influence the formation of political preferences. Furthermore, political literacy plays a critical moderating role in determining how digital political exposure is translated into stable political orientation. These results demonstrate that political preference formation among Gen Z is not solely driven by exposure to digital information, but also by the individual’s ability to critically evaluate political content. By integrating social influence, digital engagement, and cognitive filtering mechanisms, this study offers a more comprehensive model of political preference formation in the digital era, particularly within a non-metropolitan regional context. The findings also provide practical insights for developing more effective and responsible digital political communication strategies targeting young voters.

Keywords: digital political engagement; e-WOM; Gen Z; political literacy; political preference

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of digital technology has fundamentally changed patterns of political communication, particularly in how the younger generation accesses and interprets political information. The development of social media has driven a shift from one-way communication to more participatory interactions, where individuals act not only as consumers of information but also as producers and distributors of political messages. This phenomenon is known as platformized politics, namely a condition where political dynamics are heavily influenced by the mechanisms and structures of digital platforms (Wijermars, 2022). In the Indonesian context, social media's role as the primary source of political information for the younger generation is increasingly dominant. A Katadata Insight Center survey showed that the majority of young people access political information through digital platforms, with Instagram used by 66.2% of respondents, followed by YouTube and TikTok (Muhamad & Nabila, 2023). This pattern confirms that the digital space has become a primary arena in shaping the political perceptions and orientations of the younger generation, particularly Generation Z, which is characterized as digital natives. The context of East Kalimantan reinforces the urgency of this study. General Elections Commission (KPU) data shows that the province has a total of 2,793,811 voters, with approximately 32–36% being young voters, including approximately 850,000 Generation Z voters. This proportion positions Generation Z as a strategic group in determining the direction of regional politics, especially in the context of social transformation resulting from the development of the Indonesian Capital City (IKN), which has raised various public issues such as development, the environment, and employment.

In this digital communication ecosystem, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and engagement Digital politics are two main mechanisms that influence the formation of political preferences. e-WOM allows the widespread dissemination of political opinions through digital social networks, which are considered more credible due to their interpersonal nature (Ismagilova et al., 2020), while engagement Digital politics reflects the level of individual involvement in consuming, discussing, and producing political content (Natalia et al., 2020). These two mechanisms not only increase information exposure but also shape how individuals interpret political reality. However, the influence of e-WOM and engagement Digital politics does not always produce rational political preferences. High exposure to digital information also comes with increased risks of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and opinion polarization. Under these conditions, political literacy Political literacy is a crucial factor in determining how individuals evaluate and process political information. Individuals with good political literacy tend to be better able to critically assess information, resulting in more stable political preferences (Rahmawati & Putra, 2025).

Although studies on the political behavior of young people have grown, there are still research gaps. Most previous studies tend to examine the influence of digital media partially, without integrating e-WOM and engagement digital politics in one comprehensive analysis model. In addition, the study places political literacy The use of political parties as a moderating variable in this relationship is still limited, particularly in the context of non-metropolitan areas such as East Kalimantan. However, the social characteristics and dynamics of local issues in this region have the potential to produce different patterns of political behavior than in metropolitan areas. Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the influence of e-WOM and engagement digital politics on the political preferences of Generation Z, as well as examining the role of political literacy as a moderating variable in this relationship in East Kalimantan. This research is expected to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive model of digital political behavior while providing practical implications for more effective political communication strategies for young voters.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Generation Z's Political Preferences in a Digital Context

The development of digital political communication has transformed the mechanisms by which political preferences are formed, particularly among Generation Z, which is highly integrated with social media. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z forms political orientations through exposure to digital information, online social interactions, and collective experiences in digital spaces. In this context, political preferences are no longer static but rather evolve dynamically, following the flow of information and interactions on social media. Conceptually, political preferences reflect an individual's tendency to choose a candidate or political issue through cognitive and affective evaluation processes (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, emotional dimensions such as candidate image and value affinity also play a role in shaping the political preferences of the younger generation (Wolf, 2022). In the digital ecosystem, this process is increasingly influenced by the intensity of information exposure and social interactions, where individuals not only consume information but also participate in political discourse through social media (Indra Lestari et al., 2024). However, Generation Z's political preferences are dynamic and susceptible to digital social influences, including public opinion and viral political content. Therefore, the quality of political preferences is largely determined by an individual's ability to critically evaluate information. Individuals with strong evaluative skills tend to produce more rational and stable preferences (Rahmawati & Putra, 2025). Thus, the formation of Generation Z's political preferences is the result of the interaction between exposure to digital information, social engagement, and individual cognitive abilities, which are further influenced by factors such as electronic word of mouth , engagement digital politics, and political literacy .

Influence Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on Political Preferences

In digital political communication, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) acts as a social influence mechanism that shapes political preferences through the distribution of opinions among social media users. Unlike formal communication, e-WOM tends to be perceived as more credible because it originates from fellow users, thus having greater power to influence individual evaluations of political issues and candidates (Ismagilova et al., 2020). This influence works through the internalization of information and the reinforcement of perceptions due to repeated exposure in digital environments. Information spread through social networks not only increases exposure but also forms a consensus of opinion that is reinforced by algorithmic structures and phenomena. echo chamber (Wijermars, 2022). In the context of Generation Z, which has a high level of digital interaction, e-WOM has become a primary reference in shaping political preferences (Fitriani et al., 2021).

Based on these arguments, the hypothesis proposed is:

H1: Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has a positive influence on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

Influence Engagement Digital Politics on Political Preferences

Engagement Digital politics reflects the level of individual engagement in political activities in the digital space, from information consumption to active participation in discussions and content production. This engagement broadens exposure to political issues while enabling individuals to build understanding through two-way social interactions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020). In this context, engagement not only increasing access to information, but also encouraging the process of forming political orientation through interactive experiences on social media. Conceptually, the higher the level of engagement The greater the impact of digital politics, the greater the opportunity for individuals to form more focused political preferences. Intense interaction in digital spaces allows individuals to explore various perspectives, test arguments, and develop more consistent political attitudes (Valenzuela, 2020). For Generation Z, for whom social media is the primary platform for political socialization, digital engagement serves as a primary mechanism in shaping political preferences (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

Based on these arguments, the hypothesis proposed is:

H2: Engagement Digital politics has a positive influence on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

Role Political Literacy as a Moderating Variable

Political literacy Political literacy reflects an individual's ability to critically understand, evaluate, and process political information. In the context of digital communication, this ability is a key factor in determining how individuals respond to exposure to political information, including that originating from e-WOM and digital interactions (Isyanawulan & Hendarso, 2023). Individuals with high levels of political literacy tend to be more selective in receiving information and are less easily influenced by emotional or viral opinions (Rahmawati & Putra, 2025). As a moderating variable, political literacy plays a role in conditioning the power of e-WOM influence and engagement digital politics on political preferences. At high literacy levels, individuals tend to make rational evaluations so that the influence of digital information is more controlled. Conversely, at low literacy levels, individuals are more susceptible to digital social influence, so that e-WOM and engagement has a stronger impact in shaping political preferences (Yudha Alam et al., 2024).

Based on these arguments, the hypothesis proposed is:

H3: Political literacy moderate influence electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

H4: Political literacy moderate influence engagement digital politics on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

Research Hypothesis Development

Based on the theoretical studies that have been described, the formation of Generation Z's political preferences in a digital context is influenced by the interaction between digital social factors and individual cognitive capacity. Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and engagement digital politics acts as a primary source of political exposure and interaction, while Political literacy functions as a mechanism that conditions how information is processed in the formation of political preferences. Conceptually, e-WOM and engagement digital politics is assumed to have a direct influence on political preferences, whereas political literacy acts as a moderating variable that strengthens or weakens the relationship. Thus, this research model integrates digital social influence and cognitive factors to explain the dynamics of Generation Z's political preference formation in East Kalimantan.

Based on this framework of thought, the hypothesis in this study is formulated as follows:

H1: Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has a positive influence on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

H2: Engagement Digital politics has a positive influence on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

H3: Political literacy moderate influence electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

H4 Political literacy moderate influence engagement digital politics on the political preferences of Generation Z in East Kalimantan.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory design to analyze the relationship between electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), engagement digital politics, and the political preferences of Generation Z, as well as examining the role of political literacy as a moderating variable. The study population was Generation Z in East Kalimantan who actively use social media as a source of political information. Generation Z in this study is defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who grew up in an environment dominated by digital technology (Dwidienawati et al., 2025; Chardonnens, 2025). Based on this definition, the respondent criteria for this study were individuals aged 17–26 years. Sampling technique using Purposive sampling, with the criterion being that respondents had been exposed to political information through digital platforms. Data were collected through an online questionnaire.

The research instrument was compiled based on indicators adapted from previous research, which consisted of 5 indicators for the e-WOM variable (Fitriani et al., 2021; Indra Lestari et al., 2024), 5 indicators for engagement digital politics (Indra Lestari et al., 2024), 5 indicators for political literacy (A. Setiawan et al., 2025), and 4 indicators for Generation Z's political preferences (Fitriani et al., 2021). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software. Model evaluation was conducted through: (1) outer model – including convergent validity (loading factor > 0.7 and AVE > 0.5), discriminant validity (cross loading), and composite reliability (> 0.7); and (2) inner model – including R-square and Q-square values. Hypothesis testing was conducted through bootstrapping, with acceptance criteria if the t-statistic value > 1.96 and p-value < 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 158 respondents from Generation Z in East Kalimantan, aged 17–26. Most were 25–29 (48.7%), had a bachelor's degree (46.2%), lived in Balikpapan (36.7%), had 1–3 years of exposure to political social media (53.2%), and frequently used YouTube (36.7%) as the social media platform. In general, respondents represent the early productive age group with high levels of exposure to digital information. This characteristic indicates that they are engaged in an active digital-based political communication environment, both as consumers and participants in online political discourse.

Evaluation of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The convergent validity test results show that 19 indicators have loading factor values > 0.70 and are declared valid. The AVE value for all constructs exceeds 0.50, which meets the convergent validity requirements. All constructs also meet the discriminant validity requirements based on the cross-loading results. Table 1 presents a summary of the outer model test results.

Table 1. Results of the Validity and Reliability Test of the Constructs

Variables	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Information
E-Wom (X)	0.722	0.905	0.928	Reliable & Valid
Digital Political Engagement (X2)	0.745	0.915	0.936	Reliable & Valid
Political Literacy (Z)	0.755	0.920	0.939	Reliable & Valid
Gen Z (Y) Political Preferences	0.730	0.877	0.915	Reliable & Valid

Source: SmartPLS results data, 2026

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

The results of the structural model evaluation show that the Gen Z Political Preferences (Y) variable has an R² value of 0.476 (Adjusted R² = 0.459), which is included in the strong model category, meaning that approximately 47.6% of the variation in investment decisions can be explained by the variables in the model. The Q-square value of 0.421 indicates that the model has adequate predictive relevance.

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the hypothesis test through bootstrapping are presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Table 2. Results of the Direct Effect Test

Variable Relationship	Coefficient (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Note:
E-WOM → Gen Z Political Preferences	0.224	3,451	0.001	✓
Digital Political Engagement → Gen Z Political Preferences	0.290	4,140	0,000	✓

Source: SmartPLS results data, 2026

Table 3. Results of the Indirect Effect Test

Variable Relationship	Coefficient (β)	T-Statistic	P-Value	Note:
Political Literacy x E-WOM → Gen Z Political Preferences	0.247	3,476	0.001	✓
Political Literacy x Engagement Political Digital → Political Preferences	0.330	3,712	0,000	✓

Source: SmartPLS results data, 2026

Research Discussion

Influence Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on Political Preferences

The results of the study show that electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has a positive and significant influence on Generation Z's political preferences. This finding indicates that the formation of political preferences is not only influenced by the amount of information received, but also by the level of relevance of the information to the individual's needs. This is reflected in the predominance of indicators indicating the suitability of political information to individual interests and needs, confirming that relevant information is easier to process and internalize. At the same time, political preferences are also influenced by the affective dimension, as indicated by strong emotional attachment to candidates. This relationship suggests that exposure to relevant information through e-WOM can strengthen the formation of political preferences through a combination of cognitive and emotional processes. These findings align with research by Lee and Kim (2020), Chen and Zhang (2021), and Sunaryanto (2024), which demonstrates that e-WOM-based communication on social media plays a role in shaping individual opinions and perceptions of political issues. Furthermore, Taebenu et al. (2025) emphasized that Generation Z tends to utilize information from digital social networks as a reference in forming attitudes and decisions.

Influence Engagement Digital Politics on Political Preferences

The results of the study show that engagement Digital politics has a positive and significant influence on Generation Z's political preferences. This finding indicates that active involvement in digital political activities has an important role in shaping individual political orientation. The dominance of indicators reflecting an individual's ability to express political views through digital media demonstrates that the essence of digital engagement lies in active participation. This activity is not only a form of communication but also a reflective process that strengthens the consistency of political attitudes. The association with political preference indicators suggests that this engagement also strengthens emotional attachment to candidates. These findings align with research by Boulianne (2020) and Theocharis and Quintelier (2020), which shows that involvement in digital political activities can influence individual political attitudes and participation. Furthermore, Putra and Hidayat (2023) and Pratama and Nugroho (2022) emphasize that digital interactions enable individuals to gain diverse perspectives, which strengthen the formation of political preferences.

Role Political Literacy in Moderating the Influence of e-WOM on Political Preferences

The results of the study show that political literacy moderates the influence of e-WOM on Generation Z's political preferences. This finding indicates that the effectiveness of e-WOM in shaping political preferences is not

only determined by the relevance of the information, but also by the individual's ability to process the information critically. The predominance of indicators reflecting an individual's readiness to participate consciously and rationally indicates that political literacy serves as a cognitive mechanism for filtering information. The relationship between information relevance, evaluative skills, and emotional engagement suggests that political literacy strengthens the quality of political preference formation. These findings align with research by Guess et al. (2020) and Vraga and Bode (2020), which emphasize that political literacy helps individuals evaluate digital information. Furthermore, Setiawan and Hidayat (2023) and Rahman and Pratama (2024) demonstrate that political literacy strengthens the influence of digital communication on shaping the political attitudes and preferences of the younger generation.

Role Political Literacy in Moderating Influence Engagement Digital Politics on Political Preferences

The results of the study show that political literacy also moderates the influence engagement digital politics on Generation Z's political preferences. These findings suggest that digital engagement will be more effective when accompanied by an individual's ability to understand and critically evaluate information. The dominance of indicators reflecting digital political expression, information evaluation skills, and emotional engagement suggests that digital engagement supported by political literacy results in more mature political preferences. Without adequate literacy, digital engagement can potentially be merely reactive, whereas with good literacy, it becomes a reflective process that strengthens political attitudes. This finding aligns with Boulianne (2020) and Theocharis and Quintelier (2021), who demonstrated that digital engagement influences the formation of political attitudes. Furthermore, Putra and Hidayat (2023) and Pratama and Nugroho (2022) emphasized that intense digital interaction can strengthen the formation of political preferences through exposure to diverse perspectives.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study shows that the formation of Generation Z's political preferences in a digital context is significantly influenced by electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and engagement digital politics. The influence of e-WOM confirms that political preferences are not only determined by the intensity of information exposure, but primarily by the relevance of the information to individual interests and needs. On the other hand, engagement Digital politics has a stronger role in shaping political preferences, which shows that active involvement in digital political interactions is the main mechanism in building the political orientation of the younger generation. In addition to the direct influence, this study also found that political literacy acts as a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between digital communication and political preferences. This shows that an individual's ability to understand and evaluate political information is a determining factor in optimizing the influence of e-WOM and engagement digital politics. Thus, the formation of Generation Z's political preferences is the result of the interaction between the relevance of digital information, the intensity of engagement in digital spaces, and the individual's cognitive capacity to critically process political information.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study extend the study of digital political communication by showing that the influence of digital communication on political preferences is not direct and uniform, but is influenced by the quality of information processing at the individual level. The integration of e-WOM and engagement digital politics in one model shows that the formation of Generation Z's political preferences is not only influenced by exposure to information, but also by active participation in the digital space. The main contribution of this research lies in the placement political literacy as a moderating variable that explains the mechanisms by which digital information is processed before forming political preferences. This finding emphasizes that the cognitive dimension cannot be separated from the dynamics of digital communication, thus enriching the model of political behavior by integrating social, participatory, and cognitive aspects within a single analytical framework.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study indicate that the effectiveness of digital political communication depends not only on information distribution but also on the ability to present information relevant to audience characteristics. Therefore, political communication strategies aimed at Generation Z need to be designed with content personalization and the relevance of issues to the audience's everyday experiences in mind. In addition, the research results confirm that the increase engagement Digital politics plays a strategic role in shaping political preferences. This indicates that providing interactive spaces that encourage active participation, such as digital discussions and opinion exchanges, is a crucial element of effective political communication.

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