Proceedings Series on Social Sciences & Humanities, Volume 24 Proceedings of International Student Conference on Education (ISCE)

PRESS ISSN: 2808-103X

Mass Media in Political Education of University Students: A Study on Perceptions of National Leadership

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

DOI:

10.30595/pssh.v24i.1574

Submited: June 14, 2025

Accepted: July 06, 2025

Published: July 23, 2025

Keywords:

Mass Media, Political Education, National Leadership

ABSTRACT

The mass media, especially social media, plays an important role in the political education of students in today's digital age. The rapid and widespread accessibility of political information allows students to develop political awareness and form perceptions of national leadership. This study aims to analyze the role of the media in political education for students, focusing on how their perceptions of the quality of national leadership are shaped through media consumption. Using a literature review approach with a descriptive qualitative method, the research data was obtained through an analysis of academic literature from ten relevant sources discussing media, political education, and national leadership. The results of the study indicate that the intensity of social media use is positively correlated with the level of students' political understanding. Additionally, digital literacy plays a crucial role in determining the accuracy of students' political perceptions, while diversifying information sources enriches their political perspectives. However, misinformation and information bias remain serious challenges that must be addressed through strengthening media literacy. This study emphasizes the need for synergy between the mass media, educational institutions, and political parties in shaping holistic political education based on democratic values. In conclusion, the mass media has great potential in building a politically aware, critical, and moral younger generation, provided it is supported by adequate digital literacy and access to credible information.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the third largest democracy in the world, Indonesia faces significant challenges in improving the quality of political participation among its citizens, particularly among the younger generation. Students, as a strategic and educated group, are expected to play a key role in the nation's political dynamics. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) and the General Elections Commission (KPU), over 60% of voters in the 2024 elections will come from the millennial and Gen Z generations. This highlights the substantial political contribution of young people, including students, in shaping the direction of national leadership. However, reality shows that their participation is often inconsistent, even exhibiting a tendency toward apathy. One of the main factors influencing this condition is the change in political information consumption patterns—where students

rely more on mass media, especially social media, than formal sources such as civic education (Nadia, 2023; Darmayanti et al., 2024).

In this context, the media is not only a channel of information but also an active actor in shaping political awareness and public perception of national leaders. Academic studies show that in the third era of political communication, social media has replaced the dominance of conventional media in conveying political messages (Noorikhsan et al., 2023). Students are not only consumers but also producers of information through digital media, which allows for more open and participatory discussion spaces. However, media is not free from bias. Khumairoh (2021) notes that media convergence and ownership conglomeration lead to political narratives that favor elite interests. As a result, framing and agenda setting in news reporting often influence how students understand national leadership figures (WARDA, 2024; Lumeno & Pati, 2022).

Political education plays a crucial role in fostering students' critical understanding of political dynamics. Political education can take formal or informal forms. Formal political education is implemented through curricula such as citizenship courses, while informal forms occur through student organizations, public discussions, and consumption of mass media (Prasetyo et al., 2023). Some studies suggest that formal political education is normative and less responsive to current issues, making mass media, particularly social media, a complementary and more contextual and engaging alternative for students (Yuliandari et al., 2023). Therefore, mass media now plays a strategic role as an agent of political education that aligns better with the learning style of the digital generation (Alya Warda, 2024).

In this context, mass media can be divided into two types: conventional media and new media. Conventional media such as newspapers and television are one-way, while new media such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are two-way and participatory. Students tend to consume new media as their primary source of political information ahead of the 2024 elections (Nadia, 2023). However, not all social media content is educational. Much of it is biased, contains misinformation, or is provocative. This requires high digital literacy so that students can filter information and form rational and responsible political opinions.

National leadership is understood not only in terms of electability but also integrity, national vision, and the ability to inspire. In practice, the image of a leader is often shaped by the media through specific narratives and symbols. Research shows that students' perceptions of leadership figures are more influenced by media representation than direct experience (Syafiqul Humam, 2025). Claudia and Wempi (2024) reveal that the use of local cultural symbols in social media content reinforces the impression of leadership that is close to the people. Meanwhile, Sitepu (2023) shows that the mass media has the power to mobilize young voters through agenda setting and a strong persuasive function.

This study uses a library research approach, focusing on the analysis of scientific documents discussing media, political education, and national leadership. The scope of the study is limited to publications from 2021 to 2025, which are relevant to the context of the 2024 elections and the digital dynamics of students. The data sources consist of nationally accredited journals, proceedings, campus research reports, and other valid and verified supporting documents (Khumairoh, 2021; Sadiyah et al., 2025). The type of data used is secondary data, which is systematically analyzed to identify patterns and relationships between key concepts.

Data collection techniques involved searching and classifying documents based on keywords, topics, and relevance to the theoretical framework used. Data was analyzed using a qualitative content approach, grouping information based on the dimensions of mass media, political education, and perceptions of national leadership. Source triangulation was applied to ensure validity, by comparing findings from various sources to avoid interpretive bias (Nadia, 2023; WARDA, 2024). The strength of this approach lies in its ability to reflectively integrate various theoretical findings, although it is limited in generalization because it does not involve primary data. Therefore, further studies using digital ethnography, field surveys, or algorithm analysis are highly recommended (Darmayanti et al., 2024; Lumeno & Pati, 2022).

2. RESULTS

2.1 Students Obtain More Political Information from the Media (Rather than Formal Education)

Today's digital-age students obtain more political information from the mass media, especially social media, than from formal educational channels such as citizenship courses or campus academic forums. The short, visual, and communicative nature of social media content makes platforms such as Instagram and TikTok the primary choice for young people in understanding national political issues. A study conducted by Darmayanti (2024) shows that the majority of students rely on politicians' accounts, influencers, and online media as their primary sources for following political developments leading up to the 2024 elections. Support for this finding also comes from Nadia (2023), who notes that 70% of students trust social media trends more than professors' explanations or scientific references in shaping their political attitudes.

Furthermore, research by the University of Medan (UNIMED, 2024) reveals that political discussions among students occur more frequently in digital spaces than in classrooms. Students actively comment on video content, follow live streams, and even create their own political opinion content as a form

of engagement. This indicates a transformation of the political education space toward a more participatory and free environment. Interestingly, students perceive short videos under one minute in duration as a more effective tool for political learning compared to lengthy and formal scientific articles or textbooks. This means that the format of information presentation has become a crucial factor in capturing students' attention and interest in political issues.

However, behind the ease of access and attractive packaging, there are new challenges in terms of depth of understanding. The Indonesian Education Star Journal (2025) states that while students can quickly grasp political issues through digital content, their understanding tends to be superficial. Content such as political memes, podcasts, and reaction videos is more appealing than textbooks or formal lectures. In a study by Syafiqul Humam and Hanif (2025), it was found that content featuring the voices of prominent figures, dramatic background music, and dynamic visuals is able to stimulate students' emotions more strongly. Therefore, it can be concluded that the shift in students' primary sources of political information from formal institutions to digital media is a massive structural phenomenon with significant impacts on students' political thinking and behavior.

2.2 The Image of National Student Leadership is Shaped by Media Narratives, Not Critical Analysis

The development of social media has not only changed the way students access information, but also shaped the way they assess national leadership figures. Currently, political figures are actively building public personas that are attractive and easily accepted by the younger generation through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Research by Sadiyah et al. (2025) reveals that major parties like Golkar design social media communication strategies with a light, emotional, and visual approach to attract students' attention. The narratives constructed tend to emphasize personality over policy ideas. This aligns with the findings of Lumeno & Pati (2022), who noted that students' perceptions of sensitive issues like political dynasties are heavily influenced by how the media frames the information, rather than through in-depth academic analysis.

Furthermore, findings from UNIMED (2024) reinforce that students' perceptions of political figures are more determined by how active and engaging those figures are on social media, rather than the quality of their work programs or personal integrity. In the research by Warda & Lestari (2024), it was found that political figures packaged with a "young, trendy, and down-to-earth" image receive high appreciation from students, even if they do not always bring substantial ideas. In fact, terms like "cool on TikTok" are often used by students as a measure of a leader's popularity and electability. This indicates a shift from a rational-analytical approach toward evaluations based on visual and emotional impressions.

Student perceptions of leadership are also shaped by informal content widely circulated on digital media, such as political memes, parody videos, and viral comments. A study by PoliMedia (2021) confirms that social media has become the primary tool for conveying political messages in a lighthearted and easily understandable manner. Students are more easily influenced by social interactions in comment sections or "stitch" video trends than by lengthy articles or academic discussions. The TikTok Politics Journal (2025) even shows that students' perceptions of political figures are more shaped by public reactions on social media than by the content of campaign programs. Thus, it can be said that media has replaced critical analysis as the foundation for building students' perceptions of national leadership.

2.3 Students Are Responsive to Visual and Interactive Content – Digital Media Becomes the Main Reference

Generation Z is widely recognized as being highly responsive to brief, visual, interactive, and entertaining content. In the context of political education, this preference positions platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts as the primary sources for accessing and absorbing political issues. The *Jurnal TikTok Politik* (2025) notes that university students are more interested in political content lasting under one minute, especially when presented humorously or with satirical tones. Such content is considered more relatable and easier to grasp than formal political materials. Similarly, *WISSEN Journal* (2024) highlights the growing popularity of podcasts like "*Bocor Alus Politik*" among students, attributing it to the podcast's ability to convey serious political issues in a light, relaxed, yet informative manner. These findings indicate that a communication style adapted to student preferences and consumption patterns plays a significant role in enhancing youth engagement in contemporary political discourse.

Students today are not only consumers but also producers of political messages within increasingly participatory digital spaces. A report from Universitas Negeri Jakarta (UNJ, 2023) reveals that students are more actively expressing political opinions through features like Instagram story polls, TikTok comment sections, and YouTube live chats. These digital arenas allow them to feel more free, secure, and unconstrained by formal classroom conventions. *STISIP Journal* (2023) reinforces this by stating that political memes and other popular content have become far more effective tools of political communication than academic discussion forums. This horizontal mode of communication creates an egalitarian space among peers,

fostering a sense of shared ownership over ongoing political narratives. Moreover, many students are now actively creating their own political opinion content in the form of videos, graphics, or written comments, which in turn contributes to the emergence of a new, digitally based political literacy culture.

Furthermore, emotional and personal approaches have proven to be the most effective political campaign strategies within the digital student sphere. Research by Sora et al. (2024) emphasizes that political campaigns using youthful language and addressing everyday student concerns—such as tuition fees, meal costs, or campus bureaucracy—tend to resonate more deeply with university students. In this context, *PoliMedia Journal* (2023) asserts that visual media like memes and infographics exert a stronger influence on shaping student opinions than lengthy articles or formal lectures. Visual content enables students to receive political messages quickly, emotionally, and enjoyably. Darmayanti et al. (2024) also point out that students retain and understand political messages more effectively when delivered through short, humorous videos rather than conventional campaign posters. These findings reinforce the argument that digital media has shifted the paradigm of political education from a textual-formal model to a visual-participatory one, aligning more closely with the characteristics of the digital generation.

2.4 The Influence of Social Media on the Psychological Dynamics and Political Identity of Students

Social media influences students' political preferences through personalized and interactive campaigns. Fazzat Izzati et al. (2025) note that social media successfully shapes the image of candidates and influences students' political choices. Yanti et al. (2024) support this finding by showing that students evaluate candidates based on the content they consume, rather than on formal debates or campaigns. Meanwhile, Sari & Zulkarnain (2023) found that digital discussions on social media serve as the primary space for students to express their opinions and increase political engagement.

Political communication strategies that touch on personal aspects are considered most effective. Rahmadi et al. (2024) emphasize that narratives about candidates' lives shared through social media can create emotional closeness with students. Pardana (2023) found that students' interest in political issues increases when information is conveyed through social media. However, Rahman (2024) warns that hoaxes, polarization, and filter bubbles pose significant challenges. Therefore, improving digital literacy is crucial so that students can distinguish between factual information and propaganda.

Political identity is also formed through social interactions on social media. Faizal Achmad & Dwimawanti (2024) found that student political participation in Central Java is greatly influenced by the intensity of social media use. Judijanto et al. (2024) highlight that identity politics developing on social media can strengthen student engagement but also risks causing polarization. Social media serves as a dual space: a place where political awareness grows and a battlefield for competing narratives. Students are caught in the midst of an information flow that dynamically shapes their identity, values, and political choices.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A major transformation in political education among students is occurring alongside the increasing dominance of social media as the primary source of political learning. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and political podcasts are now replacing the role of formal education in shaping the political awareness of the younger generation. Students are more interested in the visual and interactive content offered by digital media than in lecture materials, which tend to be rigid and slow to respond to current issues (Sujastika, 2024; Endarwati et al., 2022). Lie & Kusuma (2022) criticize the formal education system for lagging behind the times, while Kusnanto et al. (2023) argue that higher education institutions have not been able to compete with the speed of political information dissemination in the digital world. Social media is not merely an information space but has become an ideological battleground that shapes students' political preferences through algorithms and virality. Content such as memes, short videos, and personal narratives is deemed more effective in shaping students' opinions on national leadership than citizenship education courses (Penabulu, 2021). In this regard, political education approaches need to be updated by integrating digital literacy and adaptive communication strategies to the dynamics of social media (Vira & Reynata, 2022; Sutmasa, 2025), as well as encouraging collaboration between universities and educational content creators.

In addition to being a means of political participation, social media also poses challenges in the form of polarization and disinformation risks if not balanced with adequate digital literacy. Students are not merely consumers of information but also active actors in the production and distribution of political content, which is often shaped by algorithms and cultural values that are both local and ideological in nature (Kustiawan et al., 2022; Bao & Samosir, 2021). Therefore, a redefinition of political education is necessary to include aspects of digital citizenship that emphasize ethics, active participation, and critical thinking in virtual spaces. The literature review method used in this study has been effective in mapping trends and patterns of digital media use by students, but its limitation lies in the absence of primary data that could deepen understanding of students' experiences and motivations directly (Sujastika et al., 2024). Further studies using a netnographic approach or big

data analysis are highly recommended to capture the dynamics of digital politics in a more contextual and real-time manner. Ultimately, the shift of political education to the digital realm opens up great opportunities to shape a younger generation that is more critical, participatory, and aware of the national political reality—as long as it is accompanied by adaptive and collaborative cross-disciplinary policy strategies.

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