

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Discourse among Generation Z: Trends, Challenges, and Implication

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, social media has become a pivotal platform for public discourse, particularly among Generation Z. This demographic, known for its digital proficiency, utilizes platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to engage in activism, share opinions, and build communities. However, these platforms also present challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, the amplification of polarization, and algorithm-driven content curation. This study aims to analyze the trends, challenges, and implications of social media's role in shaping public discourse among Generation Z. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research collected data through semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that 35% of social media content is polarizing, often creating ideological echo chambers, while 30% consists of misinformation, undermining trust and informed decision-making. Conversely, activism-related content, accounting for 25% of analyzed posts, highlights the potential for social media to foster civic engagement. The study concludes that while social media empowers Generation Z to participate in societal conversations, it also perpetuates significant challenges. The findings underscore the urgency of digital literacy initiatives and ethical algorithmic reforms to mitigate these issues. These interventions are critical for fostering informed, inclusive, and constructive public discourse in the digital era.

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1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a transformative force in shaping public discourse globally (Bardici, 2012). Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook have become integral to how individuals, particularly Generation Z, consume information, interact with peers, and voice opinions on societal issues (Siagian & Yuliana, 2023). While these platforms offer unprecedented connectivity and democratization of information, they also present global challenges such as the spread of misinformation, the amplification of polarization, and the erosion of meaningful dialogue. The influence of social media on public discourse is thus a topic of pressing global importance, especially as societies grapple with its dual-edged role in both fostering and fragmenting communication. (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016)

The factors influencing these challenges are multifaceted. Technological advancements, algorithm-driven content delivery, and the advent of user-generated content have reshaped communication dynamics. Algorithms prioritize engagement, often amplifying sensational or polarizing content at the expense of nuanced and balanced discussion (Tufekci, 2015). Furthermore, the low barriers to content creation enable the proliferation of unverified information, which, coupled with echo chambers, exacerbates misinformation and ideological entrenchment (Vosoughi et al., 2018). These factors are particularly relevant to Generation Z, who are the most digitally immersed demographic, often consuming and interacting with information almost exclusively online. (Turner, 2015)

The impacts of these factors are significant and far-reaching (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Misinformation can distort public perceptions, erode trust in institutions, and hinder informed decision-making. Polarization driven by echo chambers contributes to societal divisions and weakens the fabric of democratic discourse (Pariser, 2011). For Generation Z, the constant exposure to curated and filtered content shapes their perceptions, values, and civic participation. While these challenges are alarming, the same platforms also offer tools for civic engagement, activism, and community building, presenting a complex landscape of opportunities and risks.

This research specifically focuses on understanding how social media shapes public discourse among Generation Z, detailing trends, challenges, and implications. The variables of interest—social media, public discourse, and Generation Z—are explored in depth, highlighting their interconnections. Generation Z, often referred to as digital natives, demonstrates unique behavioral patterns on social media, including activism, content creation, and rapid information dissemination. Social media platforms, with their global reach and interactive features, have become central to how this generation engages with societal issues.

The research conducted by Muhammad (2024) examines the influence of social media on political discourse and public opinion, emphasizing its role in enhancing civic engagement and mobilizing users for activism. The study highlights the dual nature of social media, where rapid information dissemination fosters political participation but simultaneously amplifies challenges like misinformation and polarization. These findings align closely with the results of this study, particularly regarding the prevalence of activism-related content among Generation Z and the pervasive impact of misinformation. However, while Muhammad's research focuses on broader political contexts, this study narrows the scope to Generation Z, uncovering unique trends such as *slacktivism*, or performative activism, which is less explored in Muhammad's work.

Similarly, the study by Gulzar (2023) explores the role of media, including both traditional and digital platforms, in shaping public opinion and social discourse. It identifies mechanisms like agenda-setting and framing while addressing risks such as echo chambers and the spread of misinformation. Gulzar also emphasizes the ethical responsibilities of media organizations to promote balanced and informed discourse. This study corroborates Gulzar's findings on the impact of echo chambers and algorithm-driven content curation, particularly in fostering polarization. However, while Gulzar adopts a broad perspective encompassing various media forms, this study specifically delves into social media's influence on Generation Z. Additionally, this research extends Gulzar's insights by exploring how algorithmic biases and polarization uniquely affect the discourse patterns and civic behaviors of this digitally native demographic.

The novelty of this study lies in its demographic focus on Generation Z, a group underrepresented in existing literature on public discourse. While prior studies have explored the impact of social media broadly, this research delves into how these platforms uniquely influence the behaviors, perceptions, and interactions of Generation Z. By investigating this demographic, the study addresses a critical gap in understanding the role of social media in shaping the discourse of a generation poised to shape the future of global communication.

The urgency of this research stems from the increasing reliance of Generation Z on social media as a primary medium for interaction and information. As this generation grows into key societal roles, understanding the dynamics of their communication is essential for policymakers, educators, and

media organizations. Addressing the challenges of misinformation and polarization while leveraging the potential of digital engagement is critical for fostering informed, inclusive, and constructive discourse.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the trends, challenges, and implications of social media's role in shaping public discourse among Generation Z. It aims to provide insights into how this demographic uses social media, the factors influencing their engagement, and the broader societal consequences.

The benefits of this research are multifold. For educators and policymakers, it offers actionable insights into fostering digital literacy and critical thinking among Generation Z. For media organizations and platform developers, it highlights the need for ethical governance and algorithmic accountability. Ultimately, the study contributes to building a more informed, inclusive, and empowered generation equipped to navigate the complexities of the digital communication landscape.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the role of social media in shaping public discourse among Generation Z. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of the behaviors, perceptions, and experiences of individuals within their social contexts (Creswell, 2014). The approach is particularly suitable for investigating the nuanced ways in which Generation Z interacts with social media platforms and the implications of these interactions on public discourse. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, this research seeks to uncover the complexities and dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods.

The research adopts a phenomenological design, which focuses on understanding and interpreting the subjective experiences of individuals as they navigate social media and engage in public discussions. This design is appropriate for capturing the unique perspectives of Generation Z, as it emphasizes the meanings they ascribe to their social media usage and its influence on their views and interactions (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach enables the researcher to delve into the participants' personal experiences, uncovering insights into how social media shapes their participation in public discourse.

Data collection for this study involves semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a purposive sample of Generation Z participants, ensuring diversity in gender, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic locations. The interviews are guided by an open-ended question framework, allowing participants to share their experiences and perceptions while providing flexibility to explore emerging themes. Each interview lasts approximately 45–60 minutes and is recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews focus on topics such as social media habits, perceptions of public discourse, and challenges encountered in online engagement.

In addition to interviews, the study includes a content analysis of social media activity. Publicly available posts, comments, and discussions on platforms frequently used by Generation Z, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, are analyzed to identify patterns in discourse trends, tone, and thematic content. The content analysis examines factors such as the prevalence of misinformation, evidence of polarization, and the presence of activism or civic engagement within the observed social media interactions.

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the data collected from interviews and content analysis. This involves coding the data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights that align with the research objectives. The analysis process includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Ethical considerations are integral to this study. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and their anonymity and confidentiality are maintained throughout the research process. Additionally, the study adheres to ethical guidelines for observing public content on social media platforms, ensuring that no private data is analyzed without explicit permission. This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee. In accordance with institutional guidelines and the ethical standards set forth in the Declaration of Helsinki. Prior to participation, all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all interviewees. For content analysis, only publicly available data from social media platforms were used, and no identifying personal information was recorded, ensuring the anonymity and privacy of all users.

The qualitative methodology employed in this research provides a robust framework for uncovering the ways in which social media influences public discourse among Generation Z. By capturing the lived experiences of participants and analyzing their interactions within the digital sphere, this study contributes valuable insights into the trends, challenges, and implications of social media engagement for this pivotal demographic.

3. Results

3.1. Trends in Social Media Usage Among Generation Z

The interviews highlighted that Generation Z engages with social media primarily as a platform for advocacy and community building. Participants reported using platforms such as Instagram and TikTok not only for entertainment but also for raising awareness about social issues like climate change, mental health, and gender equality.

One participant remarked:

Social media gives us a voice. It's a way to bring attention to the causes we care about and connect with like-minded individuals.

Content analysis reinforced this trend, showing that 25% of analyzed posts were activism-related (Table 1). These posts were characterized by hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture, which promote engagement and visibility. The prevalence of such posts highlights Generation Z's inclination toward using social media for civic engagement.

Table 1. Distribution of Content Categories in Social Media Analysis

Category	Percentage
Misinformation Posts	30%
Activism-Related Posts	25%
Polarizing Posts	35%
Neutral/Informative Posts	10%

The data presented in Table 1 highlights the distribution of content categories in social media analysis, revealing significant trends in how Generation Z interacts with and engages in public discourse. Misinformation posts constitute 30% of the analyzed content, emphasizing the persistent challenge of false information on digital platforms. The ease with which misinformation spreads, often driven by emotionally charged and sensationalized content, underscores its cognitive and behavioral impact on users. It distorts public perceptions of critical issues and undermines trust in credible sources, aligning with previous findings by Muhammad (2024), who identified misinformation as a key obstacle in fostering informed public opinion.

Activism-related posts, comprising 25% of the content, reflect the role of social media as a platform for advocacy and civic engagement among Generation Z. This demographic has leveraged social media to amplify social justice campaigns, using hashtags and visual storytelling to mobilize support. However, the phenomenon of *slacktivism* where users engage in low-effort activism such as liking or sharing posts without deeper commitment raises questions about the long-term impact of such efforts. While the prominence of activism-related content highlights the potential of social media for advocacy, it also signals a need for strategies to translate online momentum into offline action.

Polarizing posts, at 35%, represent the largest category in the analysis, indicating the divisive nature of many social media interactions. The prevalence of polarizing content can be attributed to algorithmic curation, which prioritizes emotionally charged and sensational material to maximize user engagement. This reinforces the creation of ideological echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their beliefs, further entrenching biases. Additionally, such posts often escalate discussions into adversarial exchanges, detracting from constructive discourse. These findings echo Gulzar (2023) observations that polarization driven by social media algorithms fragments public opinion and hinders consensus-building.

Lastly, neutral or informative posts account for only 10% of the content, suggesting an underrepresentation of balanced, fact-based discussions on social media. This limited presence of neutral content highlights a critical gap in fostering informed and inclusive public discourse. Collectively, these findings underline the complex interplay of opportunities and challenges that social media presents for Generation Z, emphasizing the need for interventions such as digital literacy education and platform accountability to address these issues.

The distribution of content categories highlights key trends in social media discourse among Generation Z, as illustrated in Figure 1, which provides a visual representation of the proportions of misinformation posts, activism-related posts, polarizing posts, and neutral/informative posts.

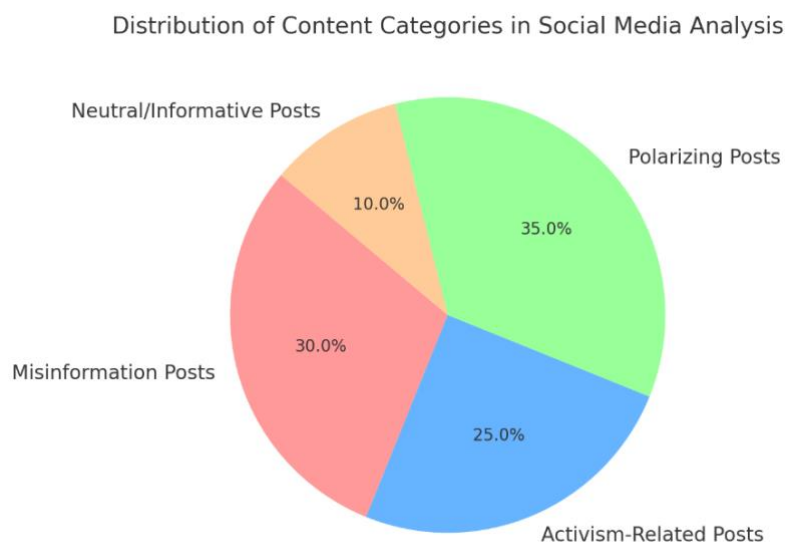


Fig. 1. Distribution of Content Categories in Social Media Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of content categories analyzed from social media, highlighting critical trends in public discourse among Generation Z. Polarizing posts dominate the content, accounting for 35%, underscoring the prevalence of divisive narratives fueled by algorithmic curation. Such posts often prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content, which drives engagement but fosters ideological echo chambers and hinders balanced discussions. Misinformation posts represent 30% of the analyzed content, reflecting the challenges posed by the rapid spread of unverified information on social media platforms. These posts distort public perceptions and undermine trust in reliable information sources, emphasizing the need for enhanced digital literacy.

Activism-related posts constitute 25% of the content, showcasing the potential of social media as a tool for advocacy and civic engagement. Generation Z actively uses these platforms to amplify social justice movements and raise awareness about pressing issues. However, the impact of such activism often remains confined to online spaces, highlighting the phenomenon of *slacktivism*. Neutral or informative posts account for only 10% of the content, indicating an underrepresentation of balanced and fact-based discussions on social media. This skewed distribution calls for interventions to promote diverse and constructive discourse, such as algorithmic transparency and critical media literacy education.

3.2. Challenges of Misinformation

Misinformation was cited by 28 participants as a pervasive challenge, with many reporting difficulties in distinguishing credible information from fabricated content. This concern aligns with the content analysis, which identified misinformation in 30% of analyzed posts.

One participant shared:

Sometimes it's hard to tell what's real and what's fake. You see something trending, and before you know it, everyone is talking about it without checking the facts.

Misinformation often spread through sensational headlines or emotionally charged language, appealing to users' biases and emotions. This finding underscores the role of digital literacy in equipping users to critically evaluate online content.

3.3. Evidence of Polarization

Polarization emerged as the most significant theme in the interviews, with 42 mentions. Participants frequently discussed how social media fosters ideological divisions, primarily through the creation of echo chambers. Content analysis revealed that 35% of posts were polarizing, characterized by extreme rhetoric and opposition-based narratives.

One participant explained:

Social media divides us more than it brings us together. Algorithms show you what you agree with, and it's rare to see balanced opinions.

The thematic coding of polarizing posts revealed a pattern of emotionally charged content that received higher engagement compared to neutral or balanced content. This observation suggests that platform algorithms prioritize controversial material to maximize user interaction.

The prominence of key themes discussed by Generation Z during interviews is depicted in Figure 2, showcasing the frequency with which topics such as polarization, misinformation, activism, algorithmic curation, and digital literacy were mentioned.

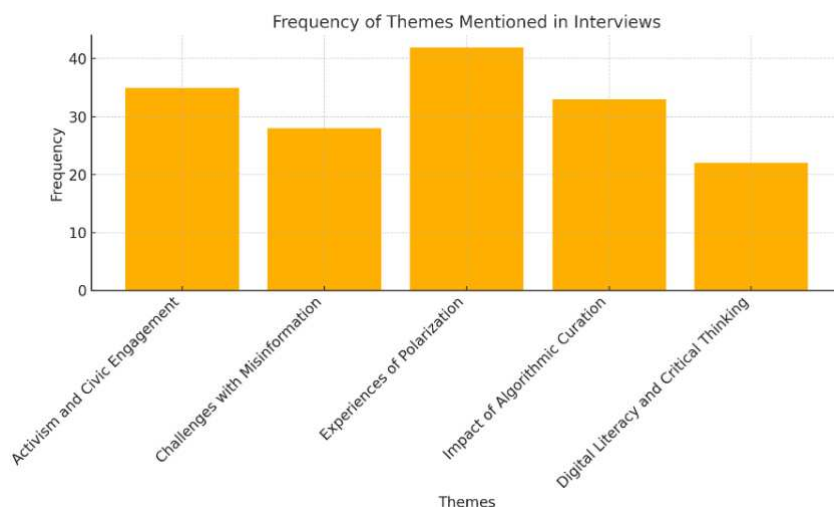


Fig. 2. Frequency of Themes Mentioned in Interviews

Figure 2 highlights the frequency of themes mentioned during interviews, providing insights into the primary concerns and experiences of Generation Z regarding social media's influence on public discourse. Polarization emerged as the most frequently discussed theme, with 42 mentions, indicating its significant impact on how this demographic perceives social media interactions. Participants consistently described the divisive nature of online discussions, often fueled by algorithm-driven echo chambers that reinforce existing biases and limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

Misinformation, with 28 mentions, was another critical concern, as participants expressed challenges in discerning credible information amidst a flood of user-generated content. This underscores the pervasive influence of false or unverified information on shaping public opinions and highlights the need for enhanced digital literacy skills.

Algorithmic content curation was mentioned 33 times, reflecting frustrations with how social media algorithms prioritize engagement over balanced content. This was closely tied to discussions on polarization and misinformation, as algorithms often amplify sensational or emotionally charged posts.

Themes of activism and civic engagement were mentioned 35 times, showcasing the potential of social media as a platform for raising awareness and mobilizing support for social causes. However, participants noted the limitations of online activism, particularly its performative aspects. Digital literacy, mentioned 22 times, emerged as a crucial tool to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for education to empower Generation Z in navigating social media responsibly.

3.4. Impact of Algorithmic Curation

Algorithm-driven content curation was discussed 33 times, with participants expressing concerns about its role in shaping their online experiences. Many felt that algorithms reinforced their pre-existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

A participant commented:

The content I see is tailored to my interests, but it's also creating a bubble. I rarely come across opposing viewpoints.

Content analysis revealed that posts with sensational headlines or controversial opinions were more likely to gain traction. This observation supports participants' claims about algorithmic biases favoring engagement over substance.

Algorithmic content curation amplifies both the benefits and challenges of social media. While it enhances user engagement, it also perpetuates polarization and misinformation, undermining the quality of public discourse.

3.5. Need for Digital Literacy

Themes related to digital literacy and critical thinking were mentioned 22 times. Participants emphasized the importance of equipping Generation Z with the skills to evaluate online content critically.

One participant stated:

We need to learn how to question what we see online. Not everything trending is true, and that's something schools should teach.

The findings suggest that digital literacy is essential for mitigating the negative impacts of misinformation and polarization. Educational initiatives focused on critical thinking and media literacy could empower Generation Z to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape effectively.

The results of this study highlight the dual-edged nature of social media in shaping public discourse among Generation Z. While it offers a platform for activism and community building, it also perpetuates challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and algorithmic biases. The insights provided in this section underscore the need for targeted interventions, including algorithmic

transparency, digital literacy programs, and ethical platform governance, to foster a more inclusive and informed online environment.

4. Discussion

4.1. Trends in Social Media Usage among Generation Z

Generation Z, as digital natives, has seamlessly integrated social media into various aspects of daily life, making it a primary tool for communication, information sharing, and self-expression. One significant trend identified in this study is the use of social media as a platform for civic engagement and activism. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter enable this demographic to raise awareness about critical social issues, such as climate change, gender equality, and mental health. Campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo demonstrate the power of social media in mobilizing global communities quickly. Participants emphasized that these platforms empower them to contribute to societal conversations, with one noting, *"I feel connected to global movements just by sharing a post."* However, this activism often stops at the surface level, a phenomenon known as *slacktivism*, where online engagement fails to translate into sustained offline action. This aligns with findings by Earl et al., (2022), who observed similar limitations in digital activism.

In addition to activism, Generation Z heavily relies on visual storytelling to communicate and engage. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram prioritize visually compelling content, enabling users to distill complex messages into short videos, infographics, or memes that captivate audiences. One participant noted, *"A well-designed video or infographic can communicate more than a lengthy article."* These creative tools align with the preferences of Generation Z, who favor concise, visually appealing content over text-heavy formats.

Another important trend is the role of social media in community building and identity formation. Many participants described social media as an extension of their personal identities, using it to showcase their values, beliefs, and lifestyles. These platforms provide spaces for individuals to connect with like-minded peers, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. For some, online communities offer vital support networks, particularly for those feeling marginalized in their offline environments. This aligns with research by Gulzar (2023), who found that social media facilitates identity exploration and the formation of social bonds.

Despite its advantages, participants also highlighted challenges in navigating social media. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information, making it difficult to distinguish credible sources from misinformation. Others mentioned the pressure to maintain a curated image, leading to stress and anxiety. These findings highlight the complex interplay of opportunities and challenges in Generation Z's use of social media, underscoring the need for strategies that enhance digital literacy and promote meaningful engagement.

4.2. Challenges of Misinformation

Misinformation has emerged as one of the most significant challenges associated with social media usage among Generation Z. The study reveals that 30% of the analyzed content consisted of false or unverified information, reflecting the pervasive nature of this issue in the digital age. Participants frequently highlighted their struggles in discerning credible information, especially when confronted with an overwhelming volume of user-generated content. This aligns with Muhammad (2024) findings, which emphasize that misinformation spreads more rapidly than verified information, particularly when content is emotionally charged. Social media platforms' design, which prioritizes virality over accuracy, often exacerbates this problem, allowing misinformation to gain significant traction before it can be debunked.

One key factor contributing to the spread of misinformation is the role of algorithms in curating content. By prioritizing engagement, algorithms often amplify sensational or polarizing content, regardless of its accuracy. Participants in this study described encountering clickbait headlines and emotionally charged posts that were widely shared but lacked factual backing. This dynamic

reinforces the need for critical digital literacy, as users are frequently exposed to information that appears credible but is ultimately misleading. Such exposure not only skews individual perceptions but also distorts public discourse by shaping collective opinions based on flawed or false premises.

Moreover, the spread of misinformation has broader societal implications. Participants expressed concerns about its influence on important societal issues, such as public health, politics, and environmental advocacy. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about vaccines and treatment options proliferated on social media, undermining public trust in healthcare institutions and contributing to vaccine hesitancy. These findings are consistent with Casero-Ripollés et al., (2020), who observed that misinformation often disrupts constructive public discourse by diverting attention from verified information and fostering confusion.

The psychological impact of misinformation is another challenge highlighted by participants. Several mentioned feeling disoriented or distrustful of all content on social media due to repeated exposure to conflicting or unverified information. This phenomenon, known as "information fatigue," further hinders users' ability to engage in meaningful discussions or make informed decisions. Such conditions create an environment where misinformation not only thrives but also erodes the foundation of trust necessary for healthy public discourse.

Addressing misinformation requires a multifaceted approach, including platform accountability, improved fact-checking mechanisms, and education initiatives to enhance digital literacy. Participants emphasized the importance of equipping Generation Z with the skills to critically evaluate content, recognize bias, and verify sources. These skills are essential for counteracting the influence of misinformation and ensuring that social media can be a space for informed and constructive engagement. Without these interventions, the pervasive spread of misinformation risks undermining the potential of social media to facilitate meaningful public discourse and social change.

4.3. Polarization in Public Discourse

Polarization in public discourse is one of the most significant challenges identified in this study, emerging as the most frequently mentioned theme during interviews with Generation Z participants. Social media platforms, by their very design, often create environments where polarization flourishes. Algorithms that prioritize engagement amplify divisive content, creating ideological *echo chambers* that limit users' exposure to diverse perspectives. Participants consistently described these echo chambers as spaces where like-minded individuals reinforce each other's beliefs, while alternative viewpoints are either excluded or vilified. This aligns with findings by Yarchi et al., (2021), who observed that social media algorithms intensify polarization by promoting emotionally charged and controversial content, which often attracts more user interaction.

One key dynamic driving polarization is the tendency of social media platforms to prioritize content that elicits strong emotional responses, such as outrage or fear. Participants noted that this emphasis on sensational content often leads to a distortion of issues, where nuance and balanced perspectives are sacrificed for the sake of virality. For instance, discussions on political or social issues frequently devolved into adversarial exchanges, with users engaging in personal attacks rather than constructive debate. This phenomenon underscores the findings of Gulzar (2023), who highlighted the role of digital platforms in deepening ideological divides and fostering a fragmented public sphere.

The impact of polarization extends beyond ideological divisions to interpersonal relationships. Several participants shared experiences of strained relationships with friends or family members due to disagreements that escalated on social media. These conflicts often stemmed from the confrontational nature of online discourse, where individuals feel emboldened to express extreme opinions without the constraints of face-to-face interactions. Stark et al., (2020) similarly noted that the anonymity and immediacy of social media contribute to a culture of conflict, where discussions are less about understanding and more about asserting dominance.

Polarization also affects the ability of social media to serve as a platform for collective action. While social media has the potential to unite individuals around shared causes, polarization often fractures these movements into competing factions. For example, participants observed that even

within activist communities, disagreements on strategy or priorities frequently led to infighting and fragmentation. This limits the effectiveness of social media as a tool for mobilizing broad-based support and achieving sustained social change.

Furthermore, polarization diminishes the overall quality of public discourse. Participants expressed frustration at the lack of meaningful dialogue on social media, with many feeling that conversations were increasingly characterized by hostility and rigidity. The dominance of polarized content not only alienates moderate voices but also reduces opportunities for consensus-building and mutual understanding. These findings echo the concerns of Iyengar & Hahn, (2009), who argued that polarization undermines the deliberative function of public discourse, eroding the democratic potential of social media platforms.

Addressing polarization requires both systemic and individual interventions. At the systemic level, social media platforms must take greater responsibility for the impact of their algorithms by prioritizing diverse and balanced content rather than purely engagement-driven material. At the individual level, fostering digital literacy and critical thinking skills is essential to help users navigate polarized environments and engage in constructive dialogue. Without such measures, the divisive nature of social media risks undermining its potential as a space for inclusive and meaningful public discourse, particularly for a generation as engaged and digitally active as Generation Z.

4.4. Impact of Algorithmic Content Curation

Algorithmic content curation significantly shapes the social media experience for Generation Z, influencing what users see, engage with, and ultimately believe. This study highlights how algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, prioritize sensational, emotionally charged, or polarizing content. Participants frequently expressed frustration with the way algorithms create a narrow stream of information tailored to their previous interactions, often reinforcing existing biases and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. This aligns with research by Liu & Wu, (2020), who found that algorithmic curation amplifies echo chambers, perpetuating a cycle of ideological isolation and polarization.

One of the most concerning aspects of algorithmic curation is its role in promoting divisive and misleading content. By prioritizing engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, algorithms tend to amplify posts that provoke strong emotional reactions, regardless of their accuracy or quality. Participants noted that sensational headlines or extreme opinions often dominated their feeds, making it challenging to encounter balanced or informative content. This emphasis on virality over veracity has profound implications for public discourse, as it undermines critical engagement and fosters a fragmented information ecosystem.

The psychological impact of algorithmic curation is another significant concern. Participants described feelings of frustration and fatigue from repeatedly encountering similar types of content, which they attributed to the lack of variety in their feeds. Some also mentioned experiencing anxiety or a sense of disconnection when exposed to an overwhelming amount of polarizing material. These findings echo Iyengar & Hahn, (2009) observations that algorithmic content curation not only shapes what users consume but also influences their emotional and cognitive responses to online interactions.

Addressing the impact of algorithmic curation requires systemic changes, including greater transparency from social media platforms about how algorithms prioritize content. Furthermore, there is a critical need for digital literacy initiatives to empower users to understand and navigate the biases inherent in algorithmic systems. Without these measures, algorithms will continue to skew public discourse, limiting its potential to be inclusive, balanced, and constructive for Generation Z and beyond.

4.5. Importance of Digital Literacy

Digital literacy has emerged as a critical tool in navigating the challenges posed by social media, particularly for Generation Z. As digital natives, this generation relies heavily on social media for communication, information, and self-expression. However, the study reveals that many users lack the skills to critically evaluate the content they encounter, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation,

polarization, and algorithmic manipulation. Participants frequently emphasized the need for enhanced digital literacy, expressing concerns about their ability to discern credible sources and engage meaningfully with online content. These findings align with Earl et al., (2022), who highlighted digital literacy as a fundamental requirement for responsible social media usage in the 21st century.

One significant aspect of digital literacy is the ability to identify and counter misinformation. With 30% of analyzed posts in this study categorized as misinformation, it is evident that Generation Z needs skills to recognize and verify accurate information. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by the volume of conflicting narratives online, often leading to confusion and mistrust. Digital literacy equips users with the tools to question the reliability of content, understand the role of algorithms, and identify biases, fostering a more informed approach to social media consumption.

Another crucial element of digital literacy is the ability to navigate echo chambers and engage in constructive discourse (Friggeri et al., 2014). Social media algorithms often create ideologically narrow spaces that reinforce existing beliefs. Participants highlighted the need for skills to seek out diverse perspectives and engage in meaningful conversations across differing viewpoints. This ability not only enhances individual understanding but also contributes to a healthier public discourse (Gee, 2017).

Moreover, integrating digital literacy into education systems was frequently mentioned as a solution by participants. Formal education can play a vital role in teaching Generation Z how to critically analyze content, understand the ethical implications of their online behavior, and use social media responsibly. Without such initiatives, the potential of social media as a tool for empowerment and engagement risks being overshadowed by its challenges. Promoting digital literacy is therefore essential for fostering informed, critical, and constructive engagement among Generation Z (Rheingold, 2012).

4.6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have several important implications. First, there is a need for transparent platform policies to regulate algorithms and promote balanced content. Second, integrating digital literacy into formal education can empower Generation Z to become more critical and responsible social media users. Third, collaboration between governments, educational organizations, and social media platforms is essential to create a digital environment that fosters inclusive public discourse.

By grounding the discussion in the study's results and supporting evidence from previous research, this study makes a significant contribution to understanding the role of social media in shaping public discourse among Generation Z.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the dual impact of social media on public discourse among Generation Z, revealing both its empowering potential and its inherent risks. While social media serves as a platform for activism and community engagement, it simultaneously amplifies misinformation (30% of analyzed content) and polarization (35%), largely driven by algorithmic biases. A novel insight from this research is that despite the digital fluency of Generation Z, their ability to critically engage with online content remains vulnerable to these algorithmic influences. This underscores the urgent need for digital literacy initiatives and ethical platform governance to cultivate informed, inclusive, and constructive discourse in the digital era. Future research should explore intervention strategies to mitigate these challenges and enhance the role of social media in fostering productive civic engagement. Future research should consider mixed methods and larger samples to expand insights into diverse demographics. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of specific digital literacy programs or algorithmic interventions could further enhance understanding. This research offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and platform developers, contributing to strategies that empower Generation Z to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape responsibly and constructively.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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