

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYZER OF SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG GENERATION Z IN THE MODERN ERA

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Abstract

This study aims to examine social issues where social media influences social change among generation Z in the modern era. Social media has become an important element in everyday life, especially for generation Z who grew up in the digital era. As the group most familiar with technology, generation Z uses social media not only to interact and share information, but also as a tool to drive social change. This article aims to examine how social media acts as a catalyst for social change among generation Z. This study uses a qualitative approach by collecting data through literature studies and observations of current social media. The results show that social media provides a platform for generation Z to voice opinions, organize social movements, and fight for social, political, and environmental issues. Social media also facilitates the rapid dissemination of information, allowing generation Z to be more sensitive to various issues and play an active role in various changes. However, there are challenges related to the negative impacts of using social media, such as inaccurate information and increasingly sharp polarity. In conclusion, social media does play a big role as a catalyst for social change, but it also requires responsibility in its use.

Keyword : social media, social change, generation Z, modern

A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media platforms since the beginning of the 21st century has transformed the way people interact, communicate, and access information, shifting traditional public spaces into the digital realm. Social media now functions as a new medium for shaping public opinion, exchanging information, and disseminating social and cultural values (Chang et al., 2023). For the demographic group born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, known as Generation Z, social media is no longer simply a platform for sharing photos or status updates, but rather an integral part of their social identity and daily activities (Siagian, 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates that social media is not only a means of communication but also a social instrument that plays a role in shaping patterns of interaction, behavior, and public participation in modern society.

Generation Z grew up in a highly advanced digital environment, with smartphones and the internet as part of their daily routine. They use social media not only to interact but also to articulate their views, build communities, and advocate for important social issues such as justice, the environment, and equality (Yadav & Rai, 2020). In this context, this generation is both a producer and a consumer of information (prosumers), actively constructing social narratives through digital media (Lammers, 2022). Through interactive features such as hashtags, short videos, and live broadcasts, they participate in digital social movements that transcend geographical boundaries and create global influence.

However, despite its positive potential, the use of social media as a tool for social change also presents complex challenges. The flow of unverified information can lead to misinformation and polarization of opinion in the digital space. Furthermore, the phenomenon of performative activism has emerged, a form of social engagement that emphasizes image over concrete action (Digital Wellness Lab, 2023). This situation creates a paradox: on the one hand, social media expands social participation, but on the other, it can diminish the quality of social movements if not accompanied by digital literacy and ethical responsibility. Therefore, a deeper understanding is needed of how Generation Z uses social media critically and productively to promote substantive social change.

Previous research has confirmed that social media plays a crucial role in the process of social change and the formation of collective consciousness. Ahmad Rafiq (2020) in his research showed that social media contributes to changes in the structure of societal values through the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, thus accelerating the process of social modernization among urban youth. Furthermore, Lucy Pujasari Supratman (2018) found that the digital native generation uses social media as a medium for self-expression and representation of social identity oriented towards public participation and social advocacy. Meanwhile, Musyirah Rahman et al. (2023) highlighted that social media also plays a role as a participatory educational tool that encourages social learning based on collective experience. All three studies emphasize the function of social media as an instrument of social transformation that influences the thinking patterns, attitudes, and behaviors of the younger generation in the context of modern society.

This study's similarity to previous work lies in the view that social media is a strategic tool for mobilizing the social participation of the younger generation. However, the main difference lies in its analytical focus: this study views social media not only as a means of communication and social education, but also as a catalyst for social change that creates real action in both the digital and physical worlds. While previous research tends to focus on aspects of communication or educational behavior, this study emphasizes how Generation Z utilizes social media to organize social movements, initiate public discourse, and advocate for global issues such as social justice, the environment, and human rights in the modern era.

Based on these differences, this study is original in its attempt to integrate three main dimensions: (1) the function of social media as a catalyst for social change, (2) the characteristics of Generation Z's digital participation in the context of online activism, and (3) an analysis of the positive and negative impacts of digital media-based social engagement. Thus, this study contributes to enriching the academic literature on the role of the younger generation in social change in the digital era and provides a new perspective on the dynamics of digital activism in Indonesia, which remains relatively underexplored in an empirical context.

The urgency of this research lies in the increasing intensity of social media use among Generation Z, which directly shapes public opinion, the direction of social discourse, and even the political behavior patterns of digital communities. Amidst the increasingly widespread flow of misinformation and performative activism, it is crucial to understand how this generation utilizes digital space productively and responsibly for substantive social change. This research is expected to address academic and practical needs in formulating digital literacy strategies and strengthening the role of young people as critical and integrated agents of change in cyberspace.

The purpose of this research is to analyze how social media acts as a catalyst for social change among Generation Z in the modern era, by examining the mechanisms of information dissemination, public opinion formation, and social movement organization through digital platforms. Furthermore, this research aims to identify the challenges and impacts of social

media use in the context of social activism and provide strategic recommendations for the development of digital literacy and sustainable social participation among Indonesia's youth.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory of Social Change

Social change is a theory that explains transformations in the structure, values, and patterns of social life over time. According to Rogers (2003), social change is the process of modifying behavioral patterns and social institutions that occurs due to human interaction with the environment and technology. This theory emphasizes that change can occur evolutionary or revolutionary depending on the intensity of adaptation and society's resistance to innovation. In the context of social media, this theory views digital communication technology as a primary driver of changes in the values and behavior of the younger generation. Therefore, social change mediated by digital media is considered a form of cultural shift that reflects the dynamics of modern society. Theory Indicators:

- Transformation of societal values, norms, and behavior.
- The influence of technology on social structures.
- Adaptation to social and digital innovations.
- Intensity of social interaction in virtual spaces.
- Shifts in patterns of social participation.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory explains that human social action is constructed through the process of interpreting symbols, meanings, and communication that develop in society. According to Blumer (1969), individual behavior is not the result of a direct reaction to a stimulus, but rather from the meaning given to a social symbol. In the context of social media, symbols such as emojis, hashtags, captions, and visuals become communication media that shape the perception and collective consciousness of Generation Z. This theory emphasizes that social reality is formed through a process of repeated interactions that create shared meaning in the digital space. Thus, online interaction on social media is not just technical communication, but also a complex process of social identity formation. Indicator Theory:

- The meaning of symbols in digital communication.
- Social interactions based on visual and textual messages.
- The formation of social identities through media.
- Interpretation of meaning in online contexts.
- Collective perceptions of social issues.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

This theory was developed by Everett Rogers (2003) and explains how technological innovations or new ideas spread through communication channels in social systems. Diffusion of innovation describes how the spread of information is influenced by five elements: the innovation itself, the communication channel, time, the social system, and adoption decisions. In the context of social media, this theory explains how Generation Z acts as the fastest adopter in the spread of ideas and digital social movements. The spread of social campaigns or online movements such as ClimateAction and BlackLivesMatter is a concrete manifestation of the innovation diffusion process in the digital social space. Therefore, this theory helps understand how communication technology mediates the spread of values and social actions that drive change. Theory Indicators:

- Adoption of technological and media innovations.
- The speed of social information dissemination.
- The role of influencers or opinion leaders.

- Digital communication patterns between users.
- The social impact of adopting new innovations.

C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to deeply understand social phenomena related to the use of social media as a catalyst for social change among Generation Z. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore participants' meanings, experiences, and perceptions contextually (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is relevant to the research focus, which emphasizes the interpretation of social actions and digital interaction patterns that cannot be measured quantitatively. According to Moleong (2019), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena in their natural context by emphasizing meaning over generalizations. Therefore, this research focuses on how Generation Z interprets and utilizes social media in the social change processes they initiate and experience.

A qualitative approach was chosen because it can explain complex and dynamic social phenomena, particularly those related to human interaction with digital technology. Social media is not only an object of communication but also a social space that reflects the values, ideologies, and dynamics of Generation Z's public participation. As explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative methods are relevant for interpreting meaningful social phenomena, especially when researchers seek to understand the context of individual behavior and motivation within their social environment. In the context of this research, qualitative methods are considered the most appropriate for exploring in depth how Generation Z utilizes social media as a platform for expression, advocacy, and social change.

Data collection technique

Data collection techniques were conducted through two main strategies:

Literature Study

This technique was used to explore and review various written sources such as scientific journals, books, research reports, and academic articles relevant to the topics of social media, social change, and the characteristics of Generation Z. Literature studies helped researchers understand the theoretical framework, basic concepts, and previous research findings that served as the basis for data analysis (Sugiyono, 2022).

Recent Social Media Observations

Observations were conducted on the platforms most widely used by Generation Z, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The goal was to identify interaction trends, forms of digital participation, and social themes frequently raised by young users. These observations were non-participatory, meaning researchers were not directly involved but instead monitored public digital activity to obtain authentic data on behavior and social expression.

Sampling Technique

This study used purposive sampling, which involves the deliberate selection of research subjects based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The informant selection criteria include:

- Individuals belonging to the Generation Z category (born between 1995 and 2012).
- Actively use social media on at least three major platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter).
- Have been or are currently involved in social activities, digital campaigns, or online communities of an advocacy nature.
- This technique allows researchers to obtain rich and relevant data, as each informant is considered capable of providing in-depth information about the phenomenon being studied.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This technique is used to systematically identify patterns (themes) that emerge from qualitative data. The analysis steps include: (1) reading and understanding the data thoroughly, (2) coding relevant data, (3) grouping codes into main themes, (4) reviewing and verifying themes, and (5) interpreting findings within the context of relevant theory and literature. This process is iterative and reflective so that the results of the analysis can represent the social reality being studied in depth and credibly.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Media and Social Change in the Digital Age

Social media has transformed many aspects of human life, particularly the way people communicate, interact, and disseminate information. Since their inception, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have provided platforms for individuals to express themselves, interact with others, and share opinions and information. In the context of social change, social media provides opportunities for groups or individuals to share information that might not be accessible through traditional media, which are often centralized and subject to strict editorial control.

Social change refers to transformations in societal structures, values, and norms that occur over a period of time. Social media plays a crucial role in social change because it allows information and ideas to spread quickly and widely, across geographic and social boundaries. Social campaigns that rely on social media often achieve global attention and drive policy change or broader action. One of the most well-known examples is the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which began in the United States in response to police violence against Black people but quickly spread worldwide thanks to social media.

Generation Z, as the group most connected to technology and social media, has great potential to become agents of social change. They utilize platforms like Twitter to voice their political opinions, Instagram for social awareness campaigns, and TikTok to spread social messages in more creative and digestible video formats. Through the use of hashtags and viral videos, they can introduce important issues to a global audience and organize broader social action.

The use of social media for social change also presents challenges. One is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on these platforms. Much information is unverified or even intentionally spread for specific interests, which can cause public confusion. Furthermore, while many social movements have achieved success through social media, there is also a phenomenon where people engage in more online "activism" without taking concrete actions that have a direct impact in the real world, often referred to as "slacktivism."

The Role of Social Media in Promoting Activism and Social Movements

Digital activism has become a growing phenomenon among Generation Z, who utilize social media to drive social change. Generation Z uses social media not only as a space to share photos or status updates, but also to organize social movements, raise awareness about specific issues, and encourage collective action. This digital activism is particularly relevant in the context of social change, as it can reach a wider and faster audience than traditional methods.

One way Generation Z uses social media for activism is through hashtag campaigns. Hashtags such as #MeToo, #ClimateAction, and #BlackLivesMatter have become symbols of

social movements that influence public policy, advocate for human rights, and address social injustice. Through these hashtag campaigns, Generation Z can draw the attention of the media, government, and the wider public to issues they consider important. Furthermore, these movements also enable individuals from different parts of the world to join the global conversation about social change.

Beyond hashtags, Generation Z also uses social media platforms to share videos, articles, and infographics aimed at educating audiences about social issues. On TikTok, for example, many young influencers use the platform to convey social messages in an engaging and accessible way. They not only talk about social issues but also provide practical solutions and ways to engage in change. While social media makes it possible to create powerful social movements, there are also challenges in measuring the real impact of digital activism. Many campaigns focus solely on spreading information or signing online petitions, but lack concrete actions that can bring about change. This often leaves digital activism seen as more of a form of "virtual resistance" without tangible results in the physical world.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Social Media on Social Change

The use of social media in the context of social change has had a significant impact, both positive and negative. On the one hand, social media has given a voice to those previously marginalized. Generation Z, highly engaged with social issues, can utilize these platforms to advocate for their rights and influence public policy. Social media also plays a role in accelerating the dissemination of information, enabling people to more quickly engage with emerging social issues.

The negative impacts of social media cannot be ignored either. One of the biggest challenges is the spread of misinformation or hoaxes, which can cause public confusion and undermine the credibility of social movements. Furthermore, social media often triggers polarization, where differences of opinion become more acute and difficult to resolve. Some social movements also face challenges in maintaining commitment and concrete action after online campaigns have concluded.

E. CONCLUSION

Social media has become a significant catalyst for social change among Generation Z. Social media platforms provide a space for them to voice their opinions, organize movements, and influence social policy. One important factor in social media's influence on this generation is its ability to accelerate the dissemination of information. With easy and fast access to various platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, Generation Z can voice issues they care about, organize collective action, and reach a wider, even global, audience. This demonstrates that social media has created a new space for more open and inclusive social discourse, where marginalized voices can be heard.

While social media offers great potential for social change, its use also brings challenges and problems that cannot be ignored. One such issue is the problem of misinformation or disinformation, where unverified information often spreads rapidly and can mislead the public. This risks undermining the credibility of social movements and creating public confusion. Furthermore, the phenomenon of "performative activism" or "slacktivism" also poses a significant challenge, where some individuals engage in social action solely to gain recognition online without any commitment to sustained, real-world action. The positive impact of social media is significant, particularly in empowering young voices concerned with social issues and global change. Generation Z utilizes social media as a tool to advocate for their rights, raise public awareness of injustice, and pressure governments and international institutions to act. Social media also enables more direct and rapid involvement in social action that was previously difficult to achieve through conventional methods. Its

negative impacts are also noteworthy. The polarization that occurs on social media, where differences of opinion become increasingly acute, often creates divisions within society. Most social actions carried out through social media also sometimes stop at the digital level without significant change in the real world. This phenomenon leaves many satisfied with simply spreading information or joining online petitions, without truly engaging in substantive change that can transform broader social conditions.

Social media has become a key tool for Generation Z in organizing and promoting social change. Despite facing various challenges, social media's potential to raise awareness, mobilize social action, and influence public policy remains significant. To maximize its positive impact, efforts are needed to increase digital literacy and awareness of the importance of accurate information and sustainable, concrete action. Social media is not only a space for communication, but also a crucial platform for championing more just and sustainable social values.

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