

Understanding Circulation Practices in Participatory Culture among Gen Z Protest Issues

Dessy Trisilowaty^{1*}, Bani Eka Dartiningsih²

Prodi Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Trunojoyo Madura, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Dessy Trisilowaty dessy.tri@trunojoyo.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed the way teenagers interact with political issues. This study analyzes how teenagers respond to digital cultural practices through the concept of circulation in Henri Jenkins' theory of participatory culture. The method used was a survey of 700 teenagers across Indonesia. Analysis of the survey results shows that TikTok has become a social media platform that is very popular among teenagers for accessing information on political issues, particularly demonstrations against the government. While sharing and participating in discussions remains very low, it demonstrates that the digital space facilitates the expression of opinions.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of TikTok as one of the most influential social media platforms has transformed the way teenagers interact with socio-political issues. Unlike traditional media, which tends to position audiences as passive consumers, TikTok provides a participatory space where users can act as both producers and distributors of content. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of participatory culture proposed by Jenkins (2009), where audiences not only receive messages but also engage in the collective creation, processing, and circulation of meaning. In Indonesia, with its predominantly young population, TikTok has become a primary medium for teenagers to discover, interpret, and negotiate political discourse, from coverage of protests to social campaigns.

Based on data from Kompas.com and [Cellular.id](https://cellular.id) Referring to the 2025 APJII survey, TikTok is the most popular social media in Indonesia, with 35.17% of active users, surpassing YouTube (23.76%) and Facebook (21.58%). Its use is popular across all genders, and data from TikTok itself shows that there are more than 160 million users in Indonesia in the first quarter of 2025, making it TikTok's main market in Southeast Asia. The largest users of TikTok in Indonesia are the younger generation, especially in the 18 to 34 age range, where this group covers around 76% of the total users. The majority of TikTok users come from the 18-24 and 25-34 age groups, indicating the dominance of the younger generation in using this platform. Demographic Details of TikTok Users in Indonesia: source GARUDA SEO. Young Generation (18-34 years): This age group is the largest user of TikTok, with a percentage of around 76% of total users.

Despite the growing academic study of TikTok, most research still emphasizes its role in the realm of entertainment, identity construction, or influencer culture (Abidin, 2021; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022). Relatively little research has explored how TikTok becomes a circulation practice within social media, particularly socio-political ones, for adolescents, particularly in Global South contexts like Indonesia, where political communication is intertwined with algorithmic visibility and digital creativity. Yet, adolescents' engagement in these participatory practices is crucial to understanding how their civic identities are negotiated through everyday digital expression.

This study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing Indonesian youth's involvement in social media circulation practices, particularly socio-political issues, on TikTok through a participatory culture framework. By highlighting consumption practices (viewing and interpreting political content) and production (re-sharing content), this study demonstrates how TikTok is not only a space for entertainment but also an arena for political participation for the younger generation.

Light and visual content (e.g., short videos, music, memes, strong visuals) have greater appeal than traditional political communication styles. This facilitates participation because it makes politics feel more "close," rather than just a heavy topic. Recommendation algorithms play a significant role in content circulation: content that sparks engagement spreads quickly, often without formal filtering, allowing contrasting, satirical, or critical opinions to emerge and spread. Duality of consumption: many teenagers use TikTok for both

entertainment and information; while the majority are simply viewers/consumers, others actively share, comment on, or recreate political content. Motives for use can include: seeking information, gaining new socio-political perspectives, demonstrating solidarity or group identity, or as a means of social criticism.

Studies on social media and adolescent engagement in socio-political issues indicate a fundamental shift in the political communication patterns of the younger generation. Several previous studies have emphasized that digital platforms function not only as channels for information distribution but also as spaces for political participation that facilitate expression, creativity, and collaboration (Loader et al., 2014; Vromen et al., 2016). TikTok, with its algorithmic characteristics that emphasize trend-driven content and engagement, opens up new opportunities for adolescents to shape and distribute political narratives through everyday digital practices (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). However, most literature still primarily examines TikTok as a medium for entertainment and popular culture, while its role in socio-political discourse is relatively underexplored.

The main theoretical framework of this research is the concept of participatory culture developed by Jenkins (2009). According to Jenkins, participatory culture is characterized by low barriers to participation, strong support for sharing creations, and a sense of social connectedness among users. In the context of TikTok, teenagers not only consume political information but also engage in the reproduction of content through remixes, duets, comments, and the use of hashtags, thereby expanding the reach of discourse. Thus, participatory culture becomes an important lens for understanding how digital engagement shapes new forms of adolescent political participation.

Henry Jenkins (2009), in his work, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, introduced the concept of participatory culture as a condition in which audiences are no longer positioned as passive consumers, but as active actors contributing to the production, distribution, and transformation of content. Participatory culture is characterized by involvement, creativity, collaboration, and sharing among users in the digital space. For example, on social media like TikTok or Instagram, teenagers not only watch demo content but also re-record it, provide alternative narratives, add music or captions, and re-share it, thus forming new meanings while expanding the reach of issues. This process shows that social media has become a participatory arena where socio-political discourse is no longer monopolized by mainstream media, but is negotiated and reproduced collectively by users.

In the context of Indonesian teenagers who consume a lot of news about demonstrations via TikTok, Henry Jenkins' (2009) concept of participatory culture is highly relevant. Teenagers are not merely passive spectators, but rather contribute to the production of political meaning through participatory practices. For example, they re-record street demonstrations, edit them with popular music, add text or memes, and then re-share them with a wider audience. This practice demonstrates how TikTok functions as a participatory space where the issue of

demonstrations presents itself not only as news but as content that is continuously negotiated and re-created by the digital community. In this way, teenagers not only receive information but also help shape public discourse and expand the reach of socio-political issues through their participatory networks (Jenkins, 2009).

The phenomenon of teenagers preferring to re-share political content through practices such as retweeting, reposting, or sharing on social media demonstrates a form of political participation that aligns with the characteristics of the digital generation: fast, instant, and interactivity-based. Rather than engaging in lengthy discussions or producing original content, teenagers tend to choose lighter methods that still serve a symbolic function—namely, marking their political position, strengthening group identity, and demonstrating solidarity with a particular issue. This practice aligns with the concept of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), where involvement does not have to involve large contributions, but can be simple actions that increase the visibility of political discourse in the digital space. Thus, sharing becomes both an expressive and political medium: teenagers can articulate aspirations, network with others, and contribute to expanding the reach of issues without having to bear the burden of full content production, while remaining a vital part of the digital political communication ecology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technological Determinism

Marshall McLuhan emphasized that technology is not merely a neutral tool, but rather a force that fundamentally shapes the way humans think, interact, and organize society. Within the framework of technological determinism, McLuhan stated that every communication medium carries a certain logic and structure that transforms human experience, even more powerfully than the content of the message conveyed. *Social Determination by Technology* In McLuhan's deterministic view, social, political, and cultural structures will adapt to the logic of the dominant medium. When print media became dominant, society was shaped by a linear, individual, and rational mindset. When digital media dominated, society was shaped by a more visual, fast, fragmentary, and participatory mindset. *Implications for the Digital Age* In the contemporary context, the role of technology, for example, social media algorithms, is not only to convey messages, but also to direct visibility, preferences, and political participation. Thus, teenagers who access TikTok are not only interacting with content, but also living in a media ecology that shapes how they understand political issues, manage identities, and participate digitally.

According to McLuhan, media is not simply a neutral channel for conveying messages, but rather shapes how people see, feel, and interact with the world through the logic of the medium itself. In the context of social media, this idea explains how digital platforms direct visibility, preferences, and social and political participation. Social media algorithms determine which content is displayed, thereby constructing social reality by highlighting certain issues or figures while marginalizing others. This process shapes the cultural and political

preferences of young people, as what is considered relevant, popular, or important is largely determined by the platform's technological logic, not just individual choices. Furthermore, social media opens up spaces for expressive and collaborative participation—for example, through the creation of memes, short videos, or digital campaigns—which make politics not merely an institutional activity but also part of everyday cultural practice. Thus, in accordance with McLuhan's framework that the medium is the message, social media inherently mediates how young people participate, negotiate identities, and understand contemporary politics.

Network Society

Manuel Castells's concept of the network society emphasizes that in the information age, global social and economic structures are increasingly determined by real-time digital networks. According to Castells (2000), these networks are becoming the dominant organizational form, replacing traditional hierarchies, where flows of information, capital, and cultural symbols move across borders through communication technology and the internet. The network society is characterized by flexibility, decentralization, and interactivity, where individuals, communities, and institutions are connected in global flows while remaining rooted in local contexts (glocalization). The implication is that power no longer resides solely with formal institutions, but also with those who are able to control and manage the flow of information within the network. In the context of digital politics and culture, the network society enables new forms of participation, such as the mobilization of youth on social media, but also creates new inequalities as access, literacy, and algorithms determine who is visible and who is marginalized.

According to Manuel Castells, the network society has three main characteristics: flexibility, decentralization, and interactivity, which distinguish it from traditional social structures. Flexibility refers to the network's ability to adapt, reshape, or even dissolve as needed without losing its primary function. Decentralization indicates that power and control are no longer centralized in a single center of authority, but rather distributed across various network nodes that can operate relatively autonomously. Meanwhile, interactivity describes the nature of networks that enable two-way communication, collaboration, and simultaneous information exchange among connected actors. The combination of these three characteristics makes networks dynamic, open, and difficult to control hierarchically, while reinforcing new logics in the economy, politics, and culture of the digital age (Castells, 2000).

Flexibility in the Digital Age

This is evident in how online communication platforms and practices enable rapid change based on user needs and social dynamics. For example, teenagers on TikTok can easily adapt their way of expressing themselves changing content formats from short videos to live streams to audio remixes according to current trends or political issues. Flexibility is also reflected in digital work such as remote working and freelancing, where individuals can

work from anywhere without being tied to a physical office space. Even in politics, social movements are now more flexible: demonstrations that previously had to be physically consolidated can now transform into online campaigns through hashtags, challenges, or memes, which spread rapidly across various platforms. Thus, flexibility allows digital networks to continuously adapt to new contexts, maintain relevance, and expand the reach of participation.

Decentralization in the Digital Era

Decentralization refers to the shift of power, control, and distribution of information from a single center of authority to various interconnected network nodes. While in the traditional media era, information was heavily controlled by large institutions such as the government or mainstream media, in the digital era, content distribution is more widespread through social media platforms, online communities, and even ordinary individuals. A concrete example is the phenomenon of demonstrations, where people can record and share socio-political events directly through social media, without having to wait for mainstream media coverage. In the political context, decentralization is seen and grows not from a single leader, but from the collaboration of many actors interconnected through digital networks. Thus, decentralization in the digital era enables broader and horizontal participation, but also presents new challenges such as information fragmentation and the spread of disinformation.

According to Manuel Castells, interactivity in a networked society is a characteristic of digital communication that enables simultaneous two-way or even multi-way relationships, unlike the one-way nature of traditional mass media communication. In today's digital era, interactivity is evident in how users are not only consumers of information but also content producers (prosumers) who can comment, share, remix, and even spark further discussion. For example, on TikTok, teenagers can respond to socio-political issues by creating video duets, stitches, or visual commentary that directly establishes a dialogue with other content. This interactivity reinforces the participatory and collaborative nature of the network, where political ideas, opinions, and narratives do not simply flow from the top down but are continuously negotiated within the digital space. However, interactivity is also subject to the platform's algorithmic logic, which determines the extent to which certain interactions gain visibility or are marginalized (Castells, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey design to examine adolescents' experiences with the social media protest phenomenon. The primary focus is on user interaction, a dynamic form of participation that emerges within TikTok's algorithmic ecosystem. The research instrument is a structured questionnaire based on theoretical indicators and has undergone a validity test. The questionnaire was distributed online to respondents aged 13–19 across Indonesia, with a total participation of 700 adolescents.

Prior to distribution, the research instrument underwent validity testing to ensure that the questions accurately measured the intended constructs,

including content circulation, participation level, motivation for engagement, and perception of political content. Data collection relied on self-administered responses through digital forms, which allowed for wide geographic coverage and accessibility among the tech-savvy teenage demographic. The data analysis focused on descriptive statistics, highlighting the proportion of teenagers involved in specific online behaviors such as viewing, commenting, sharing, and interpreting protest content.

This methodological design emphasizes representativeness and generalizability by capturing a large sample from diverse backgrounds, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how Indonesian adolescents participate in political communication through TikTok. However, it also acknowledges the limitation of quantitative surveys in exploring deeper interpretive meanings and motivations, suggesting the potential value of incorporating qualitative or mixed-method approaches in future research to better understand the emotional, cultural, and algorithmic dynamics behind youth participation in digital political spaces.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the finding that 319 out of 700 teenagers (45.6%) obtained protest content from TikTok indicates that social media now functions as a primary arena for distributing political discourse for the younger generation. TikTok is not only a medium for entertainment, but also a channel where social and political issues circulate through creative formats such as short videos, music, and memes, which are more easily accessed and accepted by teenagers than mainstream media. This phenomenon reflects the logic of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), where teenagers are not merely passive consumers, but also help expand the reach of issues by liking, sharing, or reproducing protest content. In other words, digital cultural practices through TikTok enable teenagers to build collective political awareness within a network society (Castells, 2009), where political information is no longer monopolized by traditional media, but rather spread through fluid, emotional, and multimodal network interactions.

The research implications of the finding that 319 out of 700 teenagers obtained information about demonstrations from TikTok are significant for studies of digital political participation and media trust. First, it confirms that adolescent political participation is increasingly mediated by algorithm-based digital platforms that prioritize visibility, emotional connection, and speed of message distribution, rather than by mainstream media. Second, this shift indicates a redefinition of media authority: teenagers place more trust in user-generated content than in official reporting, which is often perceived as rigid or biased. Third, adolescents' involvement in re-sharing, commenting on, or reproducing demonstration content on TikTok reflects a new form of everyday political participation, where politics is practiced through everyday digital cultural expressions, rather than solely through formal channels. Thus, further research could explore how platform preferences influence patterns of political

engagement, as well as how the dynamics of media trust are shifting from traditional institutions to fluid and participatory digital networks.

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the finding that 298 out of 700 teenagers (42.6%) were motivated to watch content on social media because they wanted to obtain information indicates that social media is no longer positioned solely as a space for entertainment, but also as a primary source of political, social, and cultural literacy for the younger generation. This informational motivation marks a shift in the function of social media as a hybrid space, where algorithmic logic meets the cognitive needs of teenagers with concise, visual, and easily shareable content formats. This phenomenon aligns with Lévy's (1997) notion of collective intelligence, as teenagers acquire knowledge collaboratively from the digital networks they participate in, while also reflecting the networked public sphere (Castells, 2009) where teenagers form opinions and collective consciousness through online interactions. Thus, this digital cultural practice demonstrates that information consumption by teenagers is not merely an individual activity, but part of a broader social process, which has the potential to influence their future patterns of public participation.

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the fact that 261 out of 700 teenagers (37.3%) agreed that videos they obtained on social media can influence public opinion confirms that digital content functions not only as a means of information, but also as a tool for the production of meaning and the formation of collective discourse. Video, with its multimodal power, presents a more emotional, persuasive, and easily reproducible narrative, thus being able to shape shared perceptions in the digital public space. This phenomenon reflects the concept of mediatized politics, where the representation of political issues depends on the logic of social media that prioritizes visibility and network connectivity. This is also in line with Jenkins' (2006) thinking on participatory culture, because teenagers not only consume content, but also participate in disseminating and negotiating meaning in public discourse. Thus, the practice of digital culture through social media implies a shift in authority in opinion formation: from the dominance of mainstream media to interactive and participatory dynamics in the digital space.

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the finding that 325 out of 700 teenagers (46.4%) stated that informative content was the most interesting indicates that social media has become a primary space for the younger generation to fulfill cognitive needs while shaping their social orientation. Interest in informative content demonstrates a shift in digital culture from mere entertainment to educational and deliberative functions, where information is packaged concisely, visually, and interactively to suit adolescent consumption patterns. This aligns with Lévy's (1997) notion of collective intelligence, as adolescents actively access, share, and process information within the collective knowledge ecosystem created on digital platforms. Furthermore, this phenomenon reflects that adolescent participation in the digital public sphere (Castells, 2009) is shaped by a preference for content that provides added informational value, so that social media is not just a place for self-expression,

but also an arena for the production and exchange of knowledge that has implications for their critical awareness.

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the fact that 87 out of 700 teenagers (12.4%) agreed to comment on demonstration content when they encountered it demonstrates how social media opens up a micro-scale yet significant space for political participation. Commenting is not simply an individual response, but rather a discursive practice that allows teenagers to negotiate meaning, demonstrate political positions, and engage in the digital production of public discourse. This phenomenon illustrates a form of everyday political participation, where political expression is present in everyday interactions on digital platforms, not just through formal channels. This also aligns with Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture, as comments become part of a collaborative ecosystem where public opinion is formed through dialogue, agreement, or debate in the networked space. Thus, despite the relatively small number, teenagers' involvement in commenting indicates a shift in the role of social media as a more horizontal, interactive, and community-based arena for deliberation.

The research implications of the finding that 87 out of 700 teenagers (12.4%) commented on demonstration content point to the importance of assessing the quality of digital public deliberation among teenagers. First, although the percentage is relatively small, engagement through comments indicates the potential for an embryonic deliberative space, where teenagers begin to practice voicing opinions and negotiating political meaning. Second, the quality of this deliberation needs to be further examined—whether their comments are argumentative, reflective, and informed, or merely emotional expressions that reinforce polarization. Third, research could explore how social media algorithms influence the visibility of teenagers' comments, thus influencing the extent to which their opinions actually enter the digital public discourse stream. Fourth, this phenomenon also raises questions about digital and political literacy: the extent to which teenagers are able to manage discursive space critically and responsibly. Thus, these findings open up opportunities for further research to understand how teenagers' commenting practices on social media can contribute to the formation of a more deliberative, inclusive, and reflective digital public sphere.

From the perspective of digital cultural practices, the fact that 55 out of 700 teenagers (7.8%) agreed to share demonstration content when they received it confirms that, despite its small proportion, sharing activities have a significant impact on expanding the reach of political discourse in the digital space. The act of sharing content is not merely redistribution, but also a symbolic practice that demonstrates political positions, builds digital identities, and strengthens solidarity within the network. This phenomenon aligns with Castells' (2009) notion of a network society, where political power arises from actors' ability to disseminate information through decentralized networks. Furthermore, sharing practices demonstrate the dynamics of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), as teenagers participate in producing the flow of political information, even though they are not the original content creators. Thus, these findings highlight how

social media has become a network-based political arena, where even small participation in the form of sharing can trigger the amplification of public discourse and influence the collective consciousness of teenagers.

The research implication of the finding that 55 teenagers (7.8%) shared demonstration content on social media is the importance of understanding sharing as a form of youth networked activism. First, despite its limited scale, the act of sharing content can create a ripple effect within the network, where a single post can be reproduced, reinterpreted, and repositioned by other audiences, thus building broader political resonance. Second, this practice demonstrates that youth activism in the digital era does not always take the form of physical collective action, but rather through micro-actions capitalized on by algorithms to broaden the visibility of issues. Third, further research needs to examine the motivational dimension—whether sharing is done out of political solidarity, a need for self-existence, or simply following trends—as each has different implications for the consistency of political participation. Fourth, this phenomenon opens up space to assess the quality of networked activism: whether sharing practices only produce superficial slacktivism or contribute to the strengthening of long-term political awareness. Thus, research on sharing as networked activism can enrich our understanding of how young people form new patterns of political engagement that are fluid, network-based, and heavily dependent on social media infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that TikTok plays a pivotal role in shaping the participatory culture of Indonesian teenagers in responding to socio-political issues, especially protest movements. The findings show that while the majority of adolescents act as passive consumers of political content, their viewing, commenting, and sharing activities still signify important forms of civic engagement within the digital space. TikTok enables them to access political information, express opinions symbolically, and contribute to the broader circulation of public discourse. The combination of entertainment and political content creates a hybrid participatory environment, where emotional resonance, visual narratives, and algorithmic visibility become key elements of digital activism. Thus, the circulation of political content on social media reflects a new model of political participation—decentralized, networked, and identity-driven marking a significant shift from traditional, institutional political communication toward everyday digital practices.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research should explore more deeply the qualitative aspects of teenagers' engagement, particularly the meaning-making process behind their participation and how algorithmic mechanisms shape visibility and interpretation of political content. Educational institutions and policymakers are encouraged to strengthen digital literacy programs that help adolescents critically assess and responsibly engage with political information on social media. Moreover, media practitioners and content creators should consider

developing inclusive and informative digital narratives that promote civic awareness without polarization. Finally, further studies can expand the scope beyond TikTok to compare how different platforms facilitate participatory culture and political expression among Generation Z across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The findings of this study open a pathway for advanced research on how algorithmic cultures mediate civic participation and political literacy among Generation Z in the Global South. Future investigations can adopt a mixed-methods or computational approach to examine how recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and affective interactions co-produce political visibility on platforms like TikTok. Such studies should not only focus on user behavior but also on the algorithmic governance that shapes what becomes politically salient in digital ecosystems. Integrating digital ethnography with big data analytics could further reveal the hidden infrastructures of participatory culture, highlighting how emotions, aesthetics, and virality function as political forces. This direction advances the discourse from merely describing online participation toward theorizing how algorithmic affordances, networked publics, and youth agency collectively redefine the architecture of political communication in contemporary media ecologies.

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