AL-IMAN
Research Journal
P-ISSN : 3006-1261 E-ISSN:3006-127X

Exploring the Impact of Social Media Political Advertising on Shaping the Opinions of Generation Z

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in shaping the political opinions of Generation Z, focusing on how political advertising impacts their beliefs and behaviors. By analyzing existing literature and conducting primary research, the study explores key elements such as engagement patterns, exposure to targeted content, and the dissemination of half-truths and misinformation. The research investigates the influence of social media political content on various aspects of Generation Z's opinion formation, particularly in the context of political decision-making.

The study was conducted in December 2024, targeting 307 respondents residing in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. A survey technique was employed to assess the impact of political content on social media. The survey utilized an interval scale for profiling and demographic questions, while the majority of questions were designed using a Likert scale to gauge opinions and attitudes. One question offered multiple-choice options to capture diverse perspectives.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into how social media shapes the political consciousness of Generation Z, highlighting the implications of targeted advertising and misinformation on their engagement with political discourse. This study contributes to the broader understanding of the interplay between social media and youth political behavior, offering a foundation for further exploration in this critical area.

Keywords

Social Media, Generation Z, Political Advertising, Opinion Formation, Targeted Content, Misinformation, Engagement Patterns, Survey Research.

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Introduction

In a modern-day era, bursting with quick progresses in the fields of information and communication technology, we can by no means contradict the thought that the social media and the digital media have gained the position of an imperative element of contemporary society (Wahyoedi et al., 2023). The landscape of political advertising has been significantly altered by the growth of social media, by generating an interactive and a collaborative platform that deeply impacts the opinions and actions of its users.

Political communication is a diverse field where the argumentation and discussion on information, persuasion, and influence play vital roles in shaping public opinion and policy decisions (Ikrambayevna, 2024). When it comes to the users, Generation Z or commonly known as Gen Z—those born roughly between 1997 and 2012—characterizes a distinctive and dominant demographic. Gen Z, often labelled as digital natives has grown up deeply occupied by the ever-evolving technology and the social media. Hence, making these platforms not only means of entertainment but also a principal source of consuming news and developing political beliefs.

Referring to the Pew Research Centre (2022), a vast majority of Gen Z counts on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) for news and information, differentiating them from the older generations who may still choose traditional media channels like television or newspapers over social media. This shift has deep consequences for how political ideas are formed and reinforced.

Objectives of the Study

The influence of social media is expected to continue, grow and expand as the technology and advancements in social media continue to develop, thereby, strengthening social media's position as a key force in today's world (Mahardhani, 2023).

Hence, the general purpose of this research will be to determine consequences of social media political advertising on shaping opinion of Gen Z.

- To find out that social media is used extensively used by the Generation Z.
- To determine the association between viewing of social media political advertisements and their impact on shaping opinion of the Gen Z.
- To explore that influencers and peer networks play a role in amplifying the effects of social media political ads on Gen Z.
- To assess the relationship between half-truth in political ads its impact on the opinions and beliefs of Generation Z.

Research Questions:

The course of this research will be to highlight the impact of social media political advertising on opinion formation of Generation Z. In this context, few questions will be raised to evaluate the impact of social media political advertising on shaping opinion of Gen Z.

- RQ1. Whether and to what extent social media political advertising influence the political opinions and perception of Generation Z?
- RQ2. Whether and to what extent particular features of social media promotion (e.g., targeted content, interactive formats) successfully outline Gen Z's opinions?
- RQ3. Whether and to what extent influencers and peer networks play a role in amplifying the effects of social media political ads on Gen Z?
- RQ4. Whether and to what extent exposure to half-truth in political ads has an impact on the opinions and beliefs of Generation Z?

Literature Review

The influence of social media political advertising on shaping the opinions of Generation Z (Gen Z) is a field of growing attention for researchers, politicians, and advertisers. Being the digital natives, Gen Z's association with social media (in terms of key source of news and political content) is considerably more profound than that of Baby Boomer Generation,

Generation X and Millennials. Helberger (2020) viewed social media avenues as dynamic political actors in their own right, and handlers of substantial opinion power. This literature review will highlight key studies and findings regarding how social media political advertising affects the political opinions and behaviors of Gen Z.

Media Consumption Habits of Gen Z:

Social media platforms not only allow the exchange of data between its users but also have a core purpose of expediting the social interactions and connectivity (Yohanna, 2020). Referring to a research, these social media sites, give its users the ability to follow, intermingle and react to the content shared by other app users. This feature of the social media platforms creates a more open and collaborative environment than the traditional forms of media. Furthermore, social media allows its users to form a net of virtual connections including the friends, family, co-workers, and even virtual friends, followers or the subscribers whom they have never met in person (Appel et al., 2020).

Generation Z holds this distinct feature of dependence on social media as a chief news source in contrast with the older generations that rely more on traditional media. Pew Research Center (2022) in one of its researches indicates that social media forums like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are the commonly used platforms by the younger generation. This engagement is an important indicator in influencing views because it permits Gen Z to feel more associated to the content they consume.

Personalization of the content:

An important feature of social media's effect on political opinion is the incorporation of algorithms that personalize content for consumers. Zuboff (2019) explained how these algorithms use data-driven promotion and marketing plans to target users with content that integrates with their opinions. Thus, this personalization can lead to the strengthening of previously held ideas and thoughts, creating an "echo chamber" effect where users are prone to a limited range of viewpoints.

Engaging Gen Z through Interactive and Graphical Content:

Political advertisers are enjoying the privilege given by the social media sites of creating visually appealing and collaborative content, such as videos, memes, and polls, which align with the Gen Z's preference for dynamic media. Research conducted by Enli (2017) emphasized that the collaborative nature of social media campaigns promotes greater participation and engagement from younger audiences. The ability of the social media content being shared by allows political messages to spread virally, magnifying their scope and influence.

As information shared by friends or influencers is frequently perceived as more reliable than traditional advertising, so, this practice of peer-to-peer interaction also increases the trustworthiness of political content. Social media, holds this capability to permit users to share their opinion and beliefs on a broad and an unrestricted platform, henceforth, it has shaped a vibrant virtual public field where discussion, argumentation and information propagation can occur unbelievable pace (Arisanty et al., 2020).

Influencers and Peer Networks:

The role of influencers and social media personalities in intensifying political content is particularly related to Gen Z. Influencers are often acting as a bridge between trusted sources of information and users; thus, they can make political messages look more trustworthy and relevant. Study by Abidin (2018) highlights how influencers can act as a channel between official political messages and the informal language of social media, creating a sense of community and common beliefs. This plan has turned out effective in mobilizing Gen Z, who are more likely to take part and share content validated by influencers they trust.

Misinformation and Ethical Concerns:

The quick spread of data on social media also poses challenges, particularly with the distribution of propaganda. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define how social media enables the rapid spread of fabricated information, which can modify the public belief before fact-checking efforts can neutralize it. While Gen Z is regularly seen as more media-literate than older age groups, the sophisticated nature of political ads can make it hard to distinguish trustworthy sources from the manipulated content. Data that has inaccuracies or even deceptive material has the possibility to flow rapidly (Farte & Obada, 2021). This exposure can contribute to polarization and strengthen prejudices. The moral allegations of using personal data for targeted marketing also increase concerns. Zuboff (2019) critiques the practice of data collection and algorithmic targeting for political purposes, emphasizing the potential manipulation of public opinion.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used for this research is Agenda Setting theory. According to McQuail (2010), the fundamental notion of the theory is the way the news media groups show to the masses what the key problems currently are, how these are mirrored so the public perceives these as the main issues. Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987) suggest that priming occurs when the media spotlight certain issues or attributes, thus influencing the criteria people use to evaluate political leaders or issues. In a nut shell, agenda-setting theory continues to grow, with fresh researches increasing its reach to include social media, framing, and the multifaceted connections between media, the public, and policymakers.

The researcher has applied the agenda setting theory with an objective to explore the relationship between political advertising and the opinions of Generation Z, giving insights into the mechanisms through which social media acts as a contemporary agenda-setting tool in the political dominion.

Methodology

Researcher has used the survey research method in this particular study due to its nature and the requirements. The specific focus of the study was to find out the impact of social media political advertising on shaping opinion of Generation Z. It was basically a study of Generation Z from twin cities.

For collecting data, twin cities i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi were chosen. In this research, researcher used both primary and secondary sources of information. The primary or first-hand information were survey questionnaires gathered from Generation Z of twin cities. Secondary information was collected from different books, published material and internet.

The population of this study was Generation Z from twin cities (Islamabad and Rawalpindi). The sample will consist of 307 respondents both males and females from Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

The researcher applied non-probability quota sampling by choosing equal number of respondents from both the areas i.e. Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Quota sampling is quick and cheap to organize and due to limited time researcher opted quota sampling.

In this research "exposure to social media political advertising" is an independent variable, as an independent variable is defined as the supposed cause. It basically means the viewing of political content on social media by Gen Z. The dependent variable in this research is "impact on opinion formation of Generation Z" as it is the supposed effect.

In this study quantitative survey technique was employed, by which it will be analyzed how social media political advertising is impacting opinion formation of Generation Z. Quantitative research method was used as it is basically a systematic empirical enquiry of social phenomenon via statistical, mathematical or computational procedures. Data was analyzed using statistics. The questionnaire was distributed among sample population consisting of fifteen (15) questions in all.

Analysis of Data

Table 1: Demographics		
Variables	**Frequencies**	**Percentages**
Gender		
Male	73	23.8%
Female	234	76.2%
Age		
12yrs-19yrs	65	21.2%
20yrs-27yrs	242	78.8%
City		
Islamabad	87	28.3%
Rawalpindi	220	71.7%

As evident from table, majority of the sample users were females (76.2%) while males were 23.8%. were 23.8%. Out of 307 respondents 65 were between 12-19 yrs. age group and 242 respondents were between 20-27 yrs. age group. 28.3% (87) respondents were from Islamabad and 71.7% (220) respondents were from Rawalpindi.


Fig 1: Social Media Platforms
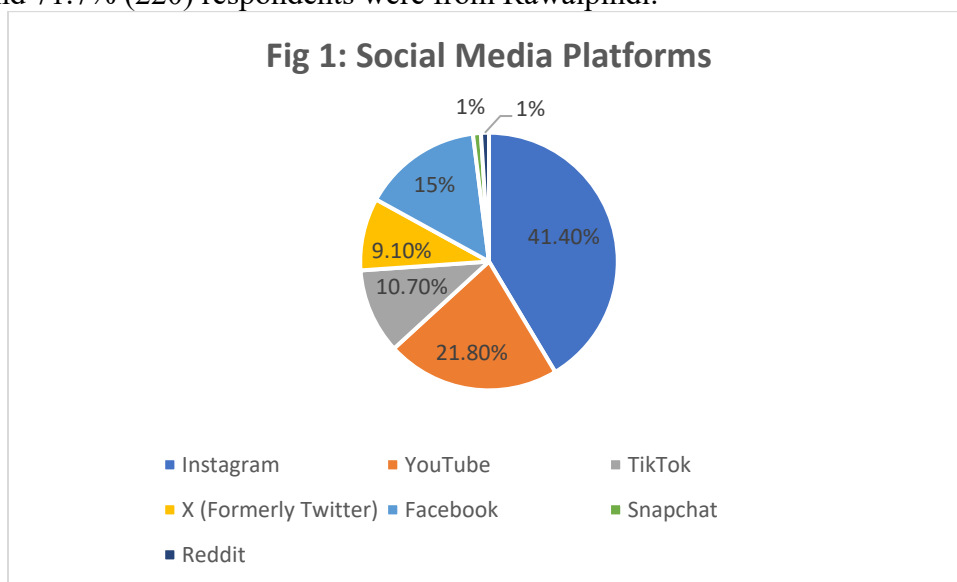
Instagram is the most dominant platform in this dataset, accounting for nearly two-fifths (41.4%) of the total. The second most used platform, capturing a little over one-fifth (21.8%). TikTok holds a notable 10.7% share. 9.1% of the respondents rely on X. Facebook remained a significant player at 15%, likely supported by its broad demographics and community features. As indicated by the table, only 1% of the respondents rely on Snapchat and Reddit each.

Table 2: Social-Media Political Advertising

Social-Media Political Advertising	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1- Use of social media platforms for political content	20.8%	32.9%	28.3%	11.7%	6.3 %
2- Engaging with the political content on the social media	10.4%	31.3%	31.6%	21.2%	5.5%
3- Social media political advertising more relatable source than traditional media	25.1%	41%	21.8%	8.5%	3.6%

A majority (53.7%) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that social media platforms are used for political content. A significant minority (28.3%) remained neutral, indicating possible doubt or lack of opinion. Only 18% (disagreed and strongly disagreed) do not see social media as a political content platform. Hence, we can say social media is broadly recognized as a platform for political discourse, though a prominent section of individuals is indifferent or unclear. Engagement levels (strongly agreed and agreed 41.7%) are adequate compared to the apparent use of social media for political content. A similar portion (31.6%) is neutral, displaying disengagement or lack of strong feelings about engaging with political content. Nearly 26.7% (disagreed and strongly disagreed) showed resistance to engaging with political content. In a nut shell, while social media is a noticeable platform for political content, active engagement is less pronounced, indicating either a lack of interest or dissatisfaction with the content.
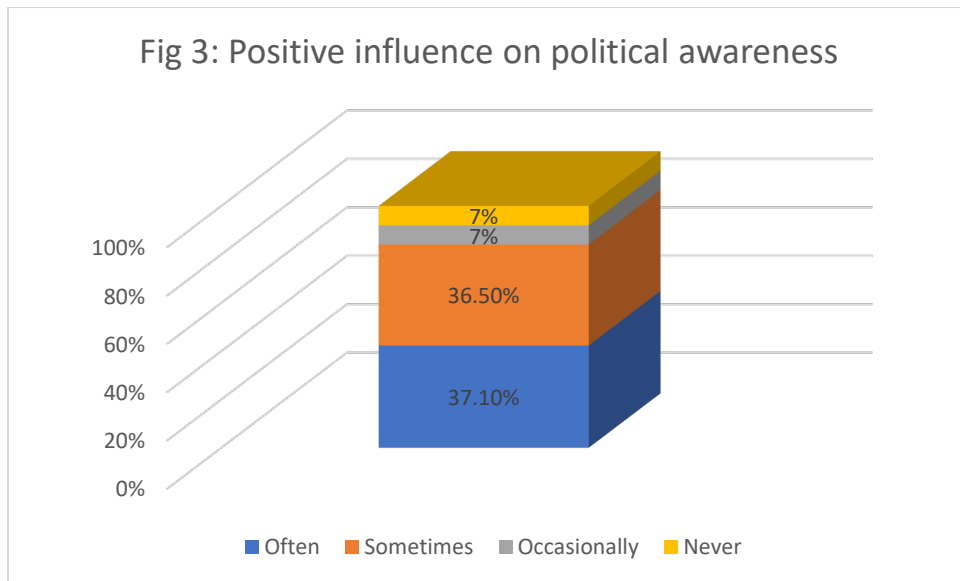
A vast majority (66.1%) found social media political ads more relevant than traditional media. Neutral responses (21.8%) suggested that some of the respondents are undecided about the relatability. Only 12.1% (disagreed and strongly disagreed) preferred traditional media. It is crystal clear that social media political ads resonate more strongly with audiences compared to traditional media, reflecting a change in how political messaging links with people.

Fig 2: Political ads are persuasive
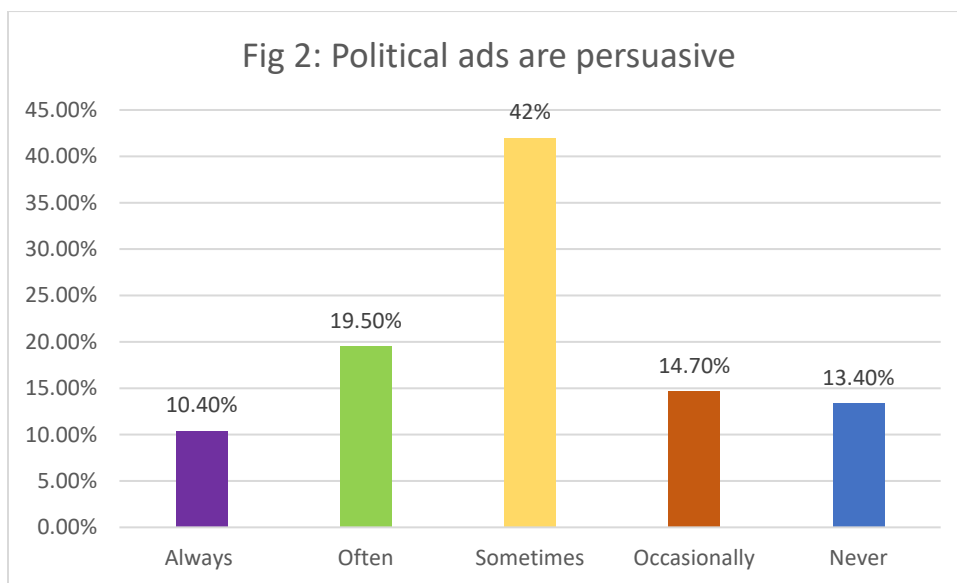
Political ads are perceived as persuasive to varying degrees, with "sometimes" being the most common response (42%). A smaller portion i.e. 29.9% found ads always or often persuasive. About 28.1% (occasionally and never) are doubtful of their persuasiveness. We can say that while many people identified the potential persuasiveness of political ads, their effectiveness varies, suggesting the need for enhanced targeting or messaging.

Particular Features of Social Media Promotion	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Decision making during elections	15.6%	33.9%	25.1%	21.5%	3.9 %
Impact on overall political discourse	15.3%	44.3%	28.7%	9.8%	1.9%

Table 3: Particular Features of Social Media Promotion

A significant portion agrees that social media impacts decision-making during elections, with 15.6% strongly agreeing and 33.9% agreeing (49.5% combined). About a quarter (25.1%) remains neutral, suggesting indecision or mixed opinions. While 21.5% disagree and 3.9% strongly disagree (25.4% combined), disagreement is less than the agreement levels. A stronger agreement is seen here, with 15.3% strongly agreeing and 44.3% agreeing (59.6% combined). A sizable 28.7% hold a neutral stance. Only 11.7% (9.8% disagree + 1.9% strongly disagree) disagree, indicating overall consensus on social media's influence on political discourse.

Fig 3: Positive influence on political awareness

100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%

7%
7%
36.50%
37.10%

■ Often   ■ Sometimes   ■ Occasionally   ■ Never

The data indicates how frequently respondents found political ads positively influencing political awareness with 12.4% reporting always and 37.1% recording often. 36.5% of Gen. Z chose that sometimes they find political ads influential. An equal percentage i.e. 7% each were of the view that they have either occasionally or never found political ads influencing political awareness positively. Briefly, the majority 85.9% (always, often and sometimes combined) perceived at least some positive influence from regular political ads while only a small fraction 14% (occasionally or never) found little to no influence.

Table 4: Endorsement of Political Content					
Endorsement of Political Content	**Always**	**Often**	**Sometimes**	**Occasionally**	**Never**
Endorsement of political content by social media influencers	10.4%	29.6%	34.2%	14%	11.7%
Political content being trusted if shared by friends and peers on the social media	9.4%	25.7%	34.2%	18.6%	12.1%
Political ads/content persuasive if shared by influencers	10.7%	21.8%	34.2%	20.2%	13%
Engagement level	**Very Likely**	**Likely**	**Neutral**	**Unlikely**	**Very unlikely**
Engagement with political content if shared by influencer	10.1%	36.8%	33.9%	10.7%	8.5%

Interestingly a great percentage i.e. 74.2% of the respondents take part to some extent (always, often, sometimes, occasionally) with endorsements from social media influencers. The majority of the Gen. Z (34.2%) engage "sometimes." While a smaller proportion i.e. 10.4% "always" engage, while 11.7% "never" engage. 69.3% of the participants of the research trust such content to some degree, with the highest trust level falling under "sometimes" (34.2%).

Additionally, a smaller group (9.4%) "always" trusted this content. 12.1% "never" trusted political content shared by friends or peers.

The table shows that 66.7% find such ads persuasive to varying degrees, with "Sometimes" (34.2%) being the dominant category. 10.7% are "Always" persuaded. 13% "Never" find such content persuasive. It's evident nearly two third of the sample found political ads persuasive with varying degrees. 46.9% of individuals were very likely or likely to engage with the political content if shared by influencers. 33.9% remained neutral when asked about engagement with the political content being shared by influencers. Only 8.5% were "very unlikely" and 10.7% were unlikely to engage.

Table 4: Misinformation/False Information in Political Ads

Misinformation/False Information	To a very great extent	To a great extent	To some extent	To a very little extent	Not at all
Misleading/False information in political ads	16.9%	31.3%	37.8%	7%	7%
Ability to identify misinformation in political ads	13.4%	31.3%	41%	8.8%	5.5%
Limiting the spread of misleading content	24.4%	31.9%	29%	5.9%	8.8%

Table 4 shows that 16.9% believed that the false information in political ads occurs to a very great extent. **31.3%** responded that it occurs "to a great extent." The majority i.e. **37.8%** of the total sample felt that it happens "to some extent." A small minority i.e. **7%** believed that there is not at all any false information in political ads. Broadly we can say that a significant majority (**86%**) perceived the presence of misinformation from a great extent to some extent, reflecting widespread awareness or suspicion of falsehoods in political ads. **13.4%** and 31.3% of respondents claimed that they can identify misinformation in political ads from a very great extent and to a great extent. A significant majority (**41%**) felt that they can identify it only to some extent. Interestingly **8.8%** admitted a limited ability to recognize the misinformation in the political ads whereas 5.5% marked inability to detect the misinformation in the political content. **24.4%** of the respondents were of the view that limiting the spread of misleading content can be achieved to a very great extent and **31.9%** believed it can be done to a great extent. Yet, **29%** thought it's possible to some extent only while a smaller proportion i.e. 14.7% were skeptical, believing that it can be limited to a very little extent or not at all.

Discussion

Some very interesting facts were observed after analyzing the result of the survey. Out of total 307 respondent's 41.4% percent Generation Z uses Instagram for engaging with the political content. It reflects a strong preference for visually engaging content among users. 21.8% respondents rely on YouTube, its popularity might stem from its diverse range of video content. Interestingly, being newer than other platforms, TikTok holds a notable 10.7% share, highlighting its rapid rise, especially among younger audiences. X with 9.1%, users among the Gen. Z is used less frequently than TikTok, suggesting its niche audience for text-based, real-time updates. This data is in clear alliance with what Pew Research Center (2022) reported in one of its researches indicating social media forums like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as commonly used platforms by the younger generation. A majority (53.7%) of the respondents

acknowledged the use of social media for political content. This finding clearly supports Helberger's (2020) stance about social media platforms as an active political actor and a platform of considerable opinion power.

A significant majority (66.1%) find social media political ads more relatable. 21.8% participants held a neutral perspective, while 12.1% of the Gen. Z believed that traditional media is more relatable. Precisely a strong majority found social media advertising more relatable, reflecting a shift in how political information is consumed compared to traditional media over the tie period. This finding is evidently supported by the literature review when it was highlighted that social media allows its users to form a net of virtual connections including the friends, family, co-workers, and even virtual friends, followers or the subscribers whom they have never met in person (Appel et al., 2020).

Only 29.9% frequently found political ads influential. 42% of the research participants responded that ads have occasional impact on many. Nearly a third (occasionally 14.7% and never 13.4%) found political ads minimally or never persuasive. This data suggests that while social media is effective at showing political content, its capability to engage and convince requires further refinement. In this context Zuboff (2019) has already explained how algorithmic driven data can be incorporated to target users with content that integrates with their principles. This personalization can lead to the strengthening of previously held ideas and thoughts.

While nearly half of the research participants believed that social media impacts election decisions, a significant portion remained neutral or skeptical. This might highlight varied levels of trust in social media as a decision-making tool. Our this finding has been precisely supported by the fact that social media handles are affecting the dynamics of public belief and enables energetic involvement from individuals belonging to the different segments of the society, with the expectation of playing a substantial role in the growth of democracy and masses' contribution in the public sphere (Mulyono et al., 2022). A strong majority (59.6%) believed that social media significantly affects overall political discourse. This suggests its role as a platform for shaping narratives and public opinion. Political ads were perceived as moderately effective in raising awareness. This research outcome supports the finding that masses' beliefs, as an integrated reflection of the varied opinions, attitudes and decisions shared by the people on varied topics, has experienced a vital modification owing to the increasingly decisive role of social media (Dwivedi et al., 2023). The data indicated that people are moderately influenced by political endorsements, whether from influencers or friends/peers. Trust in political content was context-dependent, with neither influencers nor peers overwhelmingly trusted. Engagement levels suggested influencers have a notable, but not dominant, role in shaping political conversations online. Responses highlighted diverse attitudes towards political content, reflecting varied levels of disbelief and engagement. Abidin (2018) in his study also highlighted how influencers can act as a bridge between official political content and also the informal language of social media, thereby creating a sense of community and shared opinions.

Most respondents (86%) perceived misinformation in political ads to be common, with only a small minority (7%) negating its presence. While many (44.7%) felt capable of recognizing false information, the high percentage (41%) of "To some extent" responses reflected uncertainty and the possibility for being misled. In this social media setting, users at times do have chances to only be exposed to point of view that are in line with their own beliefs or views. As a result, an impartial and comprehensive understanding of data can be limited, and trapped in viewpoints that may not necessarily reflect the broader picture (Prastyaningtyas et al., 2023). Hence, we comprehend that on one hand social media contributes significantly to delivering information to viewers but on the other hand it does not all the time ensure accuracy and neutrality. There is optimism (56.3%) about limiting the spread of fabrication, but the

wide-ranging responses clearly suggested that success depends on a joint effort from all the three individuals, platforms, and policymakers. Negative impressions like distortion, half-truth and the "filter bubble" effect can provide biased opinions. Thus, by keeping objectivity of the information circulating on the social media, we can guarantee that choices are all relying on a precise and essential information (Kapoor et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Summing up the whole discussion, it has been concluded that while over half of the participants of the research acknowledged that the social media is a political content platform, active engagement is less pronounced.

Social media is a dominant platform for political content, with a significant portion of users finding the content relatable and engaging to some extent. However, engagement levels and perceptions of persuasiveness indicate room for improvement in tailoring content to audience preferences sometimes being the dominant response suggests that context, content, and timing play crucial roles.

To conclude the whole study, researcher can say that Generation Z actively engages with social media for viewing political content. Thus, social media is one of the most effective means of conveying political messages and it actually is a powerful medium. Most of the Gen. Z rely on social media for its political information owing to the fact that it is interactive. As technology is evolving at a steadfast pace hence the younger generation tends to rely more on social media due to its multifunction than traditional media for their political awareness. In a nut shell, social media is now clearly viewed as a more relatable medium for political advertising compared to traditional media.

Conclusively, social media political ads are seen as relatable by a significant majority of the Gen. Z. It is due to the fact that social media provides them with nonstop and important political information. Not only this but it happens to be a great medium of information that has an effect on the Gen Z's political decision making as well.

In a nut shell, political ads are somewhat effective but are not universally persuasive. Political content has become a strong foundation from which Gen. Z residing in twin cities get the influenced. It is evident from analysis that Gen. Z tends get influenced when it comes to decision making regarding political content. It is now crystal-clear social media play a role in opinion shaping of the Gen. Z from twin cities. Interestingly, as a result of this study it is now apparent that the level of influence may vary but a significant majority of the young generation gets influenced.

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