



Digital political polarization and youth political participation in Indonesia: A sociological analysis of social media, political identity, and deliberative democracy

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the ways young people encounter political information, construct political identities, and participate in public life. In Indonesia, platforms such as TikTok and X have become important arenas of political socialization and expression, while algorithmic curation, selective exposure, and networked interaction may contribute to fragmented political communication. This study examines how digital political polarization shapes youth political participation in Indonesia through social media, political identity, and deliberative interaction. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study draws on literature research and qualitative examination of publicly accessible political communication on social media. The analysis is informed by Jürgen Habermas's concept of the deliberative public sphere and Shanto Iyengar's perspective on affective polarization. The findings indicate that social media functions as an arena of political socialization in which algorithmic curation interacts with user preferences, social networks, and political identities to shape patterns of political exposure and interaction. Political identity can strengthen collective solidarity and mobilization, but may also intensify ingroup-outgroup boundaries and affective polarization. These processes transform youth political participation into diverse forms, ranging from political expression and digital mobilization to selective engagement, fatigue, and withdrawal. The study argues that the central democratic challenge is not the existence of political disagreement itself, but the extent to which digitally mediated interaction enables or constrains meaningful engagement across political differences. Strengthening critical digital literacy and inclusive deliberative practices is therefore important for sustaining a more socially inclusive digital public sphere.

Keywords: Digital Political polarization, youth political participation, political identity, social media, affective polarization, deliberative public sphere, Indonesia

Introduction

Digital media have become an important social infrastructure through which citizens encounter political information, communicate with others, and express political preferences. This transformation is particularly significant in Indonesia, where internet access reached 221.56 million users in 2024, equivalent to 79.5% of the population, indicating the extensive penetration of digital communication into everyday social life (APJII, 2024). The political importance of this transformation is amplified by the demographic position of young citizens. The General Elections Commission (KPU) reported that Generation Z and Millennials constituted about 55% of the electorate for the 2024 election, making younger citizens a substantial component of Indonesia's democratic constituency (KPU, 2023) ^[10]. These conditions make youth political participation not merely an electoral issue but a broader sociological concern involving political socialization, social identity, interpersonal relations, and the formation of public opinion. Social media can expand opportunities for political expression and collective engagement, while also reshaping how citizens encounter political difference. Therefore, examining digital political polarization among Indonesian youth is important because the quality of their interactions and participation may influence the character of democratic life beyond electoral choices.

The social problem is not simply increasing social media use for politics, but the changing structure of political

interaction within digitally mediated environments. Social media platforms organize information through personalized feeds, recommendation systems, network connections, and patterns of user engagement. Such arrangements can increase the visibility of politically similar content and facilitate interaction among like-minded users, potentially reinforcing group boundaries. Research on affective polarization shows that political disagreement can develop beyond differences over policies into negative feelings toward political outgroups, while social identity can strengthen ingroup favoritism and intergroup hostility (Wakefield *et al.*, 2023) ^[22]. At the same time, evidence does not support a simple assumption that algorithmic personalization automatically produces greater polarization. A large Facebook field experiment found that reducing exposure to like-minded sources increased cross-cutting exposure but did not measurably change several attitudinal indicators, including affective polarization (González-Bailón *et al.*, 2023; Nyhan *et al.*, 2023) ^[13]. The problem, therefore, is also sociologically complex: young citizens participate in political communication within environments where platform structures, social networks, identities, emotions, and political experiences interact, potentially transforming both the form and meaning of political participation.

The Indonesian context illustrates this transformation through the increasing role of social media in youth political expression and mobilization. Studies of Indonesian

university students have found that social media use and political discussion are associated with online political participation, with online political talk functioning as an important mechanism connecting media use and participation (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023) ^[8]. Research on the digital movements #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw demonstrates how young people have used digital platforms to articulate political claims, circulate information, build collective identities, and mobilize support around public issues (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Research published in 2024 also examined political expression among Indonesian youth on YouTube through social identity and source credibility, highlighting the importance of identity and perceived information credibility in digitally mediated political expression (Venus *et al.*, 2024) ^[20]. These findings suggest that young people are not merely passive recipients of algorithmically selected information. They actively interpret, reproduce, negotiate, and contest political meanings through networked interaction. The phenomenon consequently involves two processes: expanded opportunities for political participation and the possibility that digitally organized interactions may intensify boundaries between political groups.

Previous scholarship provides several foundations for understanding these processes. Research on digital political participation has demonstrated that social media can facilitate political discussion and participation among young citizens, including through online political talk and social networks (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023; Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[8, 23]. Research on political expression shows that social identity and source credibility matter in how Indonesian youth communicate political views online (Venus *et al.*, 2024) ^[20]. At the broader level, studies of social media polarization have documented partisan segregation, hostile communication, and affective polarization across digital platforms (Overgaard *et al.*, 2024; Lerman *et al.*, 2024) ^[12, 14]. However, these strands are often examined separately. Studies of youth participation tend to emphasize mobilization, political discussion, or civic engagement, whereas studies of polarization frequently focus on partisan hostility, information exposure, or platform dynamics. Their relationship therefore requires sociological synthesis. In particular, less attention has been given to how political identity and affective polarization connect social media architecture with changing forms of youth participation in Indonesia. This gap matters because participation cannot be understood independently from the social relationships and identities producing political meanings.

A further limitation concerns the tendency to treat digital political participation either as an expansion of democratic engagement or as a decline into superficial clicktivism. Both interpretations capture only part of the phenomenon. Indonesian youth have demonstrated that digital platforms can support collective action and political discussion, while research indicates that online and offline ties can strengthen political efficacy and involvement. At the same time, studies of social media communication show that affective polarization can emerge through interaction between political groups and may be associated with intergroup avoidance or confrontation (Wakefield *et al.*, 2023) ^[22]. Large-scale social media research also shows affective polarization through hostile political communication and

engagement patterns (Overgaard *et al.*, 2024) ^[14]. Moreover, experimental evidence concerning algorithmic exposure indicates that the relationship between personalized feeds and polarization is not uniform (González-Bailón *et al.*, 2023). These findings point to a relational research gap: how do platform-mediated communication, political identity, and affective polarization jointly reshape youth political participation? Addressing this question is important for understanding digital democracy without reducing young citizens to victims or enthusiastic users of technology and politics.

The state of the art of this study lies in integrating social media, political identity, affective polarization, and youth political participation within a single sociological framework. Rather than assuming that algorithms directly determine political attitudes, the study treats algorithmic curation as one structural condition within a wider social process involving selective exposure, networked interaction, identity formation, and emotional evaluations of political groups. This approach is consistent with research showing that social media can shape perceptions of political outgroups and affective polarization (Overgaard, 2024; Lerman *et al.*, 2024) ^[12, 14]. It also responds to evidence that Indonesian youth participation may be strengthened through social networks and digital discussion (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023; Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[8, 23]. The novelty is not claiming that social media causes polarization, but explaining how polarization becomes socially meaningful and alters political participation. This framing is especially relevant in Indonesia, where young citizens occupy a central position within society. By connecting digital interaction with political identity and deliberative democracy, this study contributes a sociological interpretation of digital political participation in Indonesia during the political environment surrounding the 2024 election.

Based on this background, the research problem addressed in this study is: How does digital political polarization shape youth political participation in Indonesia through social media, political identity, and deliberative interaction? The study argues that digital political polarization is a socially mediated process rather than a direct technological effect. Algorithmic curation can influence the visibility and circulation of political content, but its consequences depend on identities, social networks, political discussions, and interpretations of political outgroups. When digitally mediated interactions repeatedly reinforce political boundaries, participation may become increasingly organized around identity affirmation and emotional group attachment; conversely, social networks and cross-cutting interactions may provide opportunities for broader political discussion and civic engagement. This avoids treating digital participation as inherently democratic or harmful. Its contribution is to connect two research domains often discussed separately: youth political participation and digital polarization. The study consequently positions Indonesian youth as active social actors whose political participation is shaped through interactions among platform structures, social relationships, identity processes, and democratic norms. This perspective provides a basis for understanding the sociological implications of Indonesia's increasingly digital political sphere.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-analytical research design to examine the relationship between digital political polarization and youth political participation in Indonesia. The study was situated within the field of political sociology and focused on social processes occurring within digitally mediated political environments. Rather than treating social media algorithms as independent technological forces that directly determine political behavior, the study examined the interaction between platform-mediated communication, political identity, affective polarization, and forms of political participation. The research primarily employed literature research complemented by qualitative examination of political communication and interaction patterns on social media platforms, particularly TikTok and X. The selection of these platforms was based on their relevance to contemporary political communication and their capacity to facilitate rapid circulation, discussion, reproduction, and contestation of political messages among digitally connected citizens. The qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study sought to interpret meanings, patterns of interaction, identity construction, and forms of political participation rather than measure causal relationships statistically. The research therefore emphasized contextual interpretation and theoretical explanation of digital political processes among young Indonesians.

Data Sources

The study relied on secondary data obtained from academic publications, research reports, institutional documents, and publicly accessible digital political communication. The academic literature consisted of scholarly articles and books addressing digital politics, youth political participation, social media, political identity, affective polarization, deliberative democracy, and algorithmic communication. Institutional and statistical sources were used to establish the broader social and political context of internet use and youth participation in Indonesia. In addition, publicly accessible political communication appearing on TikTok and X was considered as contextual digital material for identifying patterns of political expression, interaction, polarization, and mobilization. The analysis did not involve private accounts, confidential communication, or personally identifiable information. Digital materials were treated as manifestations of broader social processes rather than as individually representative evidence of all Indonesian young voters. Particular attention was given to recurring forms of political discourse, including expressions of group identification, positive and negative evaluations of political groups, political disagreement, political mobilization, and interactions between opposing positions. This combination of scholarly literature and publicly available digital material enabled the study to connect theoretical discussions of polarization with observable patterns of digitally mediated political participation.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Data collection was conducted through the identification, selection, reading, and interpretation of relevant scholarly and digital materials. The literature was selected according to its relevance to the central themes of the study, particularly youth political participation, social media use,

political identity, affective polarization, algorithmic curation, and deliberative democracy. Digital materials from TikTok and X were examined qualitatively to identify recurring patterns of political communication and interaction. The analytical process followed three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, relevant information was organized into thematic categories concerning platform-mediated information exposure, political identity, ingroup–outgroup construction, affective responses, and forms of political participation. Data display was then used to establish relationships among these categories and to identify patterns connecting digital interaction with political participation. Finally, conclusions were developed through continuous comparison between empirical patterns and the theoretical framework. This procedure followed the interactive logic of qualitative analysis, in which interpretation develops through an iterative movement between data, categories, and theoretical concepts. The purpose was not to establish statistical generalization but to develop a sociological explanation of how digital political environments may shape the meaning and forms of youth political participation.

Theoretical Analysis

The interpretation of the data was guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Jürgen Habermas's concept of the deliberative public sphere was used to examine whether digitally mediated political interaction facilitates conditions associated with rational communication, openness to different viewpoints, and public deliberation. The framework provided a basis for examining the extent to which fragmented information environments and antagonistic communication may constrain meaningful political dialogue. Second, Shanto Iyengar's concept of affective polarization was employed to analyze the development of emotional evaluations of political groups, particularly the construction of favorable perceptions of the ingroup and negative perceptions of political outgroups. The combination of these perspectives allowed the study to connect the structural dimension of digital public communication with the relational dimension of political identity and intergroup attitudes. Rather than assuming a direct causal relationship between algorithms and polarization, the analysis considered algorithmic curation as one component within a broader sociological process involving selective exposure, social interaction, identity formation, emotional attachment, and political participation. This theoretical integration was important for explaining why similar digital environments may generate different forms of participation, ranging from political expression and mobilization to withdrawal, political fatigue, and reduced engagement.

Research Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the study compared arguments and findings across different scholarly sources rather than relying on a single publication or theoretical perspective. The interpretation of digital political phenomena was also subjected to theoretical comparison between the deliberative public sphere and affective polarization perspectives. This process helped distinguish empirical observations from theoretical interpretation and prevented the analysis from reducing digital political

polarization to technological determinism. The study also recognized that publicly visible social media content does not necessarily represent the attitudes or behavior of all Indonesian young people. Therefore, observations from TikTok and X were interpreted as evidence of particular forms of digital political discourse rather than as statistically representative measurements of the youth electorate. Ethical considerations were addressed by limiting the analysis to publicly accessible materials and avoiding the disclosure of private information or personally identifiable data. The study further avoided attributing political attitudes to specific individuals unless such information was already explicitly and publicly presented within the relevant source. These considerations were important because the research concerned politically sensitive communication and identity formation among young citizens. Accordingly, the findings were presented as a sociological interpretation of observable patterns rather than as a universal characterization of Indonesian youth.

Result and discussion

Social Media as a New Arena of Youth Political Socialization

Social media has increasingly become an important arena of political socialization in which young people encounter political information, discuss public issues, construct political meanings, and develop relationships with others who share or challenge their views. Political socialization traditionally occurs through institutions such as family, school, peer groups, political organizations, and mass media. However, the expansion of digital communication has introduced a networked environment in which these processes increasingly overlap. Social media allows young citizens to encounter political messages through everyday interactions rather than through explicitly political institutions. In Indonesia, this transformation is particularly significant because social media has become closely connected with youth political participation and political discussion. Research among Indonesian university students found that social media use was positively associated with online political participation, with online political talk functioning as an important mechanism linking social media use to political engagement (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023) ^[8]. This finding suggests that social media should not be understood merely as a channel for distributing political information. Rather, it constitutes a social environment in which young people communicate, negotiate political meanings, and develop orientations toward political issues and participation.

The significance of social media as a political socialization arena becomes clearer when political participation is understood as a process rather than merely an electoral act. Young people may participate by following political debates, commenting on political content, sharing information, producing political messages, joining online communities, supporting digital campaigns, or connecting online discussions with collective action outside the digital environment. Such activities demonstrate that political participation is increasingly embedded in everyday communication practices. A 2024 study of Indonesian youth political movements found that young people played an active and central role in both online and offline mobilization during the #Reformasi Dikorupsi and #Tolak Omnibus Law movements. The study further demonstrated

a reciprocal relationship between digital and physical mobilization, in which online activities contributed to offline protest and offline events subsequently stimulated further online engagement (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Therefore, digital political socialization does not necessarily replace conventional political participation. Instead, social media can create new connections between political awareness, interpersonal networks, collective identity, and political action. From a sociological perspective, the important issue is consequently how these digitally mediated interactions influence the ways young citizens understand themselves, others, and their position within political society.

Social media also changes the social relationships through which political attitudes are developed. Political communication no longer depends exclusively on established political organizations, journalists, teachers, or family members as sources of political knowledge. Young users can encounter politicians, activists, influencers, journalists, peers, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens within the same communication environment. This creates a more decentralized process of political socialization in which political meanings are continuously produced and contested through networked interaction. Research on Indonesian youth political expression has similarly emphasized the relevance of social identity and source credibility in understanding how young people communicate political views through digital platforms (Venus *et al.*, 2024) ^[20]. Political expression therefore cannot be separated from the identities and social experiences through which young people interpret political information. Social media provides opportunities for young citizens to articulate political identities in personalized and culturally familiar forms, while simultaneously exposing them to competing identities and narratives. This makes digital political socialization fundamentally relational: young people learn not only what political issues mean, but also who belongs to particular political groups, which values are associated with those groups, and how they should respond to people who hold different political positions.

The role of social media in political socialization is nevertheless ambivalent. On one hand, digital platforms can reduce barriers to political information and communication, enabling young citizens to engage with issues that may previously have been distant from their everyday experiences. On the other hand, the abundance of political information does not automatically produce deeper political understanding or meaningful democratic participation. A systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2024 found that the relationship between social media use and political participation is context-dependent, with an overall moderate effect rather than a uniform influence across different circumstances (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2024) ^[11]. This finding is important because it challenges technological determinism. The political consequences of social media depend partly on how users interact with information, how political discussions develop within their networks, and whether digital engagement is connected with broader forms of civic involvement. Similarly, research on Indonesian urban youth around the 2024 election found that young people were politically engaged while simultaneously maintaining pragmatic and critical views toward political institutions and problems such as corruption and political dynasties (Sugiyono *et al.*, 2024) ^[19]. Thus, digital political

socialization should be understood as a complex social process rather than as a simple transmission of political messages from platforms to young voters.

From the perspective of political sociology, these developments indicate a shift from institution-centered political socialization toward a more networked and interactive process. Social media provides young citizens with spaces where political identities can be performed, affirmed, challenged, and negotiated through everyday communication. The significance of this transformation lies not simply in the increasing amount of political content consumed by young people, but in the changing social relationships through which political meanings are produced. Young citizens may develop political orientations through conversations with peers, exposure to public figures, participation in digital communities, and engagement with collective political narratives. At the same time, these interactions can strengthen social boundaries when communication becomes concentrated within politically similar networks. The digital environment therefore creates the social conditions from which both political engagement and polarization may emerge. This observation is consistent with research showing that young people can use digital platforms to construct political identities while simultaneously participating in broader online and offline movements (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Consequently, understanding youth political participation requires attention to the social processes occurring within digital networks, particularly the relationship between political communication, identity formation, and interaction across political differences.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that social media has become more than a supplementary communication channel for young citizens; it has developed into an important social arena in which political socialization occurs. Indonesian youth increasingly encounter political information, communicate political preferences, construct political identities, and organize collective activities through digitally mediated networks (Intyaswati & Fairuzza, 2023; Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[8, 23]. Nevertheless, the democratic significance of this transformation cannot be assessed simply by measuring the intensity of social media use. What matters sociologically is the character of interaction that develops within these environments: whether digital networks facilitate political discussion across differences or reinforce socially homogeneous communities. This distinction provides an important transition toward the central issue of digital political polarization. When political socialization takes place within personalized and networked communication environments, patterns of information exposure and interpersonal interaction may influence how young citizens perceive political groups and political opponents. Therefore, the next analytical question concerns how the organization of digital information particularly algorithmic curation and selective exposure can shape the social environments within which young people form and reinforce political identities. This provides the basis for examining the emergence of fragmented political information environments and their relationship with affective polarization.

Algorithmic Curation and Fragmented Political Exposure

Algorithmic curation has become an important structural feature of contemporary social media environments because

it determines, to a considerable extent, which information becomes visible to users. Unlike traditional mass media, where editors and journalists largely determine the sequence of information presented to audiences, social media platforms increasingly organize content through automated recommendation systems that respond to users' previous activities, social connections, and patterns of engagement. In political communication, this process has important sociological implications because exposure to political information is no longer entirely determined by individual choice or by conventional media institutions. Instead, political information emerges through an interaction between user preferences and platform-based selection. Research on Facebook during the 2020 United States presidential election found that users were exposed more frequently to content from politically like-minded sources than to cross-cutting sources, although the extent of such exposure varied substantially among users (Nyhan *et al.*, 2023) ^[13]. This finding indicates that digital political exposure is structured by both technological and social processes. For young citizens, who increasingly encounter political information through social media, algorithmic curation may therefore influence the social environment within which political opinions are encountered, discussed, and reinforced.

The concept of the filter bubble provides one framework for understanding this fragmented information environment. A filter bubble refers to a condition in which personalized systems selectively organize information according to users' previous preferences and behaviors, potentially reducing exposure to alternative perspectives. Closely related is the concept of the echo chamber, in which politically similar users repeatedly interact with and reinforce one another's views. These concepts should nevertheless be distinguished from the assumption that all users are completely isolated from opposing information. Evidence from large-scale Facebook research indicates that exposure to like-minded sources is common, but highly concentrated echo chambers are less prevalent than some popular accounts suggest. Nyhan *et al.* (2023) ^[13] found that the median Facebook user received a majority of content from like-minded sources, while exposure to cross-cutting sources was considerably lower; however, only a minority experienced extremely high levels of like-minded exposure. Similar evidence from 208 million Facebook users during the 2020 United States election showed that ideological segregation increased from potential exposure to actual exposure and engagement (González-Bailón *et al.*, 2023). These findings suggest that fragmentation is better understood as a continuum of political exposure rather than a complete informational enclosure.

The Indonesian context provides additional evidence that selective exposure can become socially embedded within political networks. Ali *et al.* (2021) ^[1], analyzing 82,156 social media posts and 4,050 social media accounts in Indonesia, identified two major political clusters associated with pro- and anti-Jokowi positions. Users tended to interact with others holding similar political preferences and to circulate politically congruent messages, while hashtags contributed to solidarity and mobilization within political groups. This finding is significant from a sociological perspective because fragmented political exposure does not emerge exclusively from technological recommendation systems. It also develops through homophily, network

selection, and users' own choices concerning whom to follow, interact with, and trust. Algorithmic curation may therefore reinforce an already existing social tendency toward politically similar networks rather than independently creating political segregation. The relationship between algorithms and social networks is consequently reciprocal: users generate behavioral data through their interactions, while platforms use those patterns to organize subsequent content exposure. Political fragmentation thus develops through the interaction of technological structures and social practices rather than through a one-directional technological process (Ali *et al.*, 2021)^[1].

The relationship between algorithmic curation and polarization is also more complex than the popular claim that personalized recommendations automatically radicalize users. A series of large-scale studies conducted during the 2020 United States election provides particularly important evidence. González-Bailón *et al.* (2023) found that reducing exposure to like-minded political content on Facebook increased exposure to cross-cutting sources, but did not produce measurable changes in affective polarization, ideological extremity, candidate evaluations, or beliefs in false claims. Similarly, Guess *et al.* (2023) reported that changes in the Facebook and Instagram feed environments did not substantially alter several political attitudes and behaviors. These findings do not mean that algorithmic curation is politically irrelevant. Rather, they indicate that political attitudes are embedded within broader social and psychological processes that cannot be explained by exposure patterns alone. Users bring existing identities, preferences, social relationships, and political predispositions into digital environments. Algorithmic systems consequently operate within a social context in which users actively interpret and respond to political information. For this reason, the present study treats algorithmic curation as a structural condition of political communication, rather than as a sufficient explanation for polarization.

This interaction between algorithmic selection and user behavior can be further understood through the relationship between exposure and engagement. Robertson *et al.* (2023)^[18] demonstrated that users' engagement with partisan news could differ from the political content to which they were initially exposed through online search. This distinction is important because political fragmentation is not produced simply by what platforms make available. It also depends on what users choose to consume, interact with, share, and discuss. Consequently, algorithmic curation and selective exposure should be conceptualized as mutually reinforcing processes. Platforms may prioritize content according to engagement-related signals, while users generate those signals through their behavior. Over time, repeated interactions can contribute to the stabilization of particular information environments. A user who repeatedly engages with political content supporting a particular position may consequently encounter more content that is compatible with that position, while simultaneously becoming more embedded within a network of politically similar users. Such processes can reduce opportunities for incidental encounters with alternative perspectives. From a political-sociological perspective, this matters because political attitudes are developed not only through information acquisition but also through social interaction. Fragmented

exposure can therefore affect the social context in which political identities are performed, negotiated, and reproduced.

Research published in 2024 further demonstrates the relevance of algorithmic recommendation systems to the formation of politically differentiated information environments. Park and Park (2024)^[15], examining YouTube recommendation systems in South Korea, found evidence that automated recommendations could contribute to selective exposure and echo-chamber patterns, although the strength of these patterns differed between political communities. Their findings emphasize that algorithmic filtering interacts with existing political networks rather than operating independently from them. Similarly, Del Cerro (2024), using an agent-based model, demonstrated that polarization can emerge from the interaction between social networks and selective exposure produced by filtering systems. These findings are useful for interpreting the Indonesian context because they reinforce the argument that digital polarization should be understood as a socio-technical process. Technology provides the architecture through which information is selected and circulated, but users' social relationships, political identities, and patterns of interaction determine how that architecture is experienced. Therefore, the relevant question is not simply whether algorithms create political polarization, but how algorithmically organized exposure interacts with social networks to produce conditions in which political boundaries may become more visible and more emotionally meaningful.

Fragmented political exposure has important implications for youth political socialization because young citizens may develop political understandings within information environments that differ substantially from those experienced by other users. When political information is repeatedly encountered through networks characterized by ideological similarity, political positions may become associated with particular identities, communities, symbols, and emotional narratives. Alternative perspectives may consequently be interpreted not merely as competing arguments but as expressions of an opposing social group. This process provides an important bridge between fragmented information exposure and political identity formation. However, fragmentation does not necessarily eliminate political diversity or prevent cross-cutting encounters. Young users can deliberately seek alternative sources, encounter opposing views through network connections, or participate in discussions that challenge their existing positions. The significance of algorithmic curation therefore lies in how it structures the probability and context of political encounters, rather than determining political attitudes in a mechanical way. In this sense, the digital environment can create conditions that either reinforce existing political boundaries or provide opportunities for their negotiation. The next section therefore examines how these patterns of exposure become connected to political identity and the construction of ingroup–outgroup boundaries among young citizens.

Political Identity and the Construction of Ingroup–Outgroup Boundaries

Political identity represents an important mechanism through which individuals interpret political information, evaluate political actors, and position themselves within

broad social groups. In digitally mediated environments, political identity is increasingly expressed through everyday practices such as following political accounts, sharing political messages, commenting on public issues, and affiliating with particular political communities. These practices allow young citizens to communicate not only what they think about political issues but also who they are in relation to others. Research on Indonesian youth has demonstrated that social identity is significantly relevant to political expression on social media, indicating that young users' political communication is connected to how they perceive themselves as members of particular social groups (Venus *et al.*, 2024) ^[20]. From a sociological perspective, political identity therefore operates beyond individual preference. It provides a framework through which political information acquires social meaning. A political position may become associated with particular values, lifestyles, communities, or imagined collective identities. Social media intensifies this process because political identity can be continuously displayed, affirmed, challenged, and negotiated through networked interaction. Consequently, digital political participation becomes simultaneously an expression of political preference and a performance of social belonging.

The construction of political identity becomes particularly important when social media users interact within politically differentiated networks. Individuals tend to establish relationships with others who share similar values, interests, and political orientations, a process commonly associated with social homophily. Within such networks, political attitudes can receive repeated confirmation because users encounter messages that are compatible with their existing beliefs and interact with people who provide social validation. Wakefield *et al.* (2023) ^[22] demonstrate that group identification contributes to affective polarization, particularly through stronger positive evaluations of the ingroup. Their findings are important because they indicate that polarization does not necessarily begin with hostility toward an opposing group. It may first develop through increasingly strong emotional attachment to one's own group. In social media environments, this process can be reinforced when political communities repeatedly celebrate their own symbols, narratives, leaders, and collective achievements. Political identity consequently becomes relational: the meaning of belonging to one group is partly produced through comparison with other groups. For young users, repeated participation in such communities may transform political preferences into more durable forms of social identification, making political disagreement increasingly connected to questions of belonging, loyalty, and collective recognition.

The Indonesian political context illustrates how social media can provide an environment for the construction and expression of political identities. Candra *et al.* (2024) found that social media facilitates political identity construction by enabling individuals and social groups to express and negotiate political identities through digital communication. Their analysis also highlights the emergence of echo chambers and increasing political polarization within digitally mediated interaction. Similarly, research examining Indonesian political communication has identified politically differentiated clusters in social media networks, demonstrating how users tend to interact and circulate information within networks characterized by political

similarity (Ali *et al.*, 2021) ^[1]. These patterns suggest that political identity is not simply an internal psychological characteristic carried by individuals into social media. Rather, it can be strengthened through interaction with others who share similar political orientations. Digital platforms provide symbolic resources through which political identities can be communicated and recognized, while network structures provide social environments in which those identities can be reinforced. Political identity thus becomes embedded in communication practices. Likes, comments, reposts, hashtags, visual symbols, and political narratives can all function as markers of belonging. In this context, digital political participation simultaneously produces political communication and social differentiation. The strengthening of ingroup identity can subsequently contribute to the construction of outgroup boundaries. Political disagreement becomes socially significant when opponents are no longer understood primarily as citizens holding different preferences, but as members of a distinct and negatively evaluated group. Affective polarization captures this transformation by focusing on emotional evaluations of political groups rather than differences in policy positions alone. Wagner (2024) ^[21] emphasizes that affective polarization involves political conflict characterized by viewing opposing groups as disliked outgroups, while also stressing the need to distinguish different forms and degrees of affective polarization. This conceptual distinction is important for the present study because political disagreement should not automatically be interpreted as polarization. Democratic societies necessarily contain disagreement, competition, and political conflict. Polarization becomes sociologically significant when political identities become sufficiently salient that evaluations of individuals are increasingly influenced by their perceived group membership. Within social media environments, repeated exposure to politically homogeneous narratives may therefore contribute to the social construction of boundaries between "us" and "them." The consequence is not necessarily immediate hostility, but potentially greater social distance, reduced willingness to interact, and increasing difficulty recognizing political opponents as legitimate participants in democratic life.

The relationship between ingroup identification and outgroup evaluation is particularly relevant to young people because political identity is still being developed and negotiated through social experiences. Social media offers young citizens an unusually visible environment in which political affiliations can be performed and socially rewarded. When users receive approval from peers after expressing a particular political position, political identity can acquire additional social value. Conversely, disagreement may generate criticism, exclusion, or pressure to conform to group expectations. These processes can make political identity more socially consequential than an individual's policy preference alone. Research by Wakefield *et al.* (2023) ^[22] is particularly relevant because it shows that stronger group identification was associated with affective polarization, while individuals experiencing greater affective polarization were more likely to avoid rival political groups online. This suggests a possible feedback process: identification strengthens attachment to the ingroup; strong attachment increases the social significance of political boundaries; and stronger boundaries may subsequently reduce interaction with political outgroups.

Such dynamics are important for understanding digital political polarization because they show that fragmentation is not merely an informational phenomenon. It is also a relational process involving belonging, recognition, social comparison, and patterns of interaction between political groups.

However, the construction of ingroup and outgroup boundaries should not be interpreted as an inevitable consequence of social media use. Political identities can also facilitate participation, solidarity, and collective action. Research on Indonesian youth movements demonstrates that young people have used digital networks to construct collective identities and mobilize political action both online and offline. In the cases of #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw, digital communication helped connect young participants around shared political concerns and contributed to broader collective mobilization (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. This evidence demonstrates that political identity has a dual sociological function. It can create solidarity within a group and provide motivation for political participation, while strong identity boundaries may simultaneously produce social distance from political opponents. The analytical issue, therefore, is not whether political identity is beneficial or harmful, but how identity boundaries are constructed and how they shape relationships between groups. In a democratic context, collective identity can support participation when it remains compatible with recognition of political difference. Conversely, identity-based participation can become polarizing when group loyalty becomes dependent upon negative representations of political outgroups. This distinction is central to understanding the relationship between identity and affective polarization.

From this perspective, digital political polarization can be understood as a process of boundary intensification. Social media does not simply expose young citizens to competing political opinions; it can also make political group membership more visible, emotionally salient, and socially consequential. Political symbols, hashtags, narratives, and interactions can repeatedly communicate distinctions between members and non-members of particular communities. The more political identity becomes embedded within everyday social interaction, the greater the possibility that disagreement will be interpreted through group-based rather than issue-based categories. This interpretation is consistent with research on Indonesian social media, which identifies the role of digital platforms in political identity construction and polarization (Candra *et al.*, 2024), as well as research demonstrating the relationship between group identification and affective polarization (Wakefield *et al.*, 2023) ^[22]. Nevertheless, identity boundaries remain contingent rather than fixed. Cross-cutting social networks, exposure to alternative perspectives, and meaningful interaction with political opponents may create opportunities for boundaries to be negotiated or softened. Thus, the sociological significance of digital political identity lies in its capacity to reorganize patterns of belonging and interaction. The next section examines what happens when these identity boundaries become emotionally charged and political disagreement increasingly develops into affective polarization.

From Political Disagreement to Affective Polarization

Political disagreement is a normal and necessary component of democratic life because citizens inevitably hold different preferences concerning policies, leaders, values, and visions

of society. Disagreement becomes problematic, however, when political differences are transformed into negative emotional evaluations of those who hold opposing positions. This distinction is central to the concept of affective polarization, which focuses not primarily on differences in political preferences but on the emotional distance between political groups. Wagner (2024) ^[21] explains that affective polarization concerns the tendency to evaluate political opponents negatively while maintaining more favorable evaluations of one's own political group. From a sociological perspective, this transformation represents a shift from issue-based disagreement toward identity-based conflict. Political opponents are no longer perceived simply as citizens with different opinions but increasingly as members of an outgroup whose values, intentions, or social identities are viewed negatively. Social media can provide an environment in which such emotional evaluations are repeatedly communicated and socially reinforced. Research on online networks shows that political groups can become structurally separated and that interactions involving political outgroups tend to contain more toxic communication than interactions within political groups (Overgaard *et al.*, 2024) ^[14].

The distinction between ideological and affective polarization is particularly important for understanding youth political participation. Ideological disagreement may encourage citizens to compare policy alternatives, debate public problems, and evaluate competing political programs. Affective polarization, by contrast, can shift attention from the substance of political arguments toward the perceived characteristics of political opponents. When political identity becomes strongly connected to social belonging, criticism of a political position may be interpreted as criticism of the group itself. The result is a greater tendency to defend the ingroup and distrust or dislike the outgroup. This process is consistent with the social identity perspective underlying contemporary research on affective polarization. Wakefield *et al.* (2023) ^[22] found that stronger identification with political groups was associated with affective polarization and that polarized individuals were more likely to avoid members of rival groups on social media. The significance of this finding lies in the relational character of polarization. Hostility does not develop only because citizens possess different political opinions; it can emerge because political identities become socially meaningful and are continuously reproduced through interaction. Thus, disagreement becomes polarized when political difference is increasingly interpreted through categories of belonging, loyalty, and opposition rather than through substantive policy evaluation.

Digital communication can intensify this process because social media provides continuous opportunities for emotional expression and public evaluation of political groups. Unlike conventional political discussion, where communication may be limited by institutional settings or editorial practices, social media enables users to react immediately through comments, reposts, memes, hashtags, videos, and other expressive forms. Such practices can make emotional responses highly visible and easily circulated. Lerman *et al.* (2024) ^[12] demonstrate that affective polarization can influence information diffusion in online networks, while Overgaard *et al.* (2024) ^[14] identify systematic patterns of partisan toxicity and engagement across multiple countries. Their findings suggest that

political communication online is characterized not simply by disagreement over issues but also by interactional patterns in which political outgroups are treated differently from ingroups. Importantly, however, the presence of emotional or hostile communication does not mean that all users become polarized to the same degree. Polarization depends on the structure of political networks, existing identities, patterns of interaction, and the specific political context. For Indonesian youth, this means that social media may provide opportunities both for political participation and for the emotional intensification of political boundaries. The same digital environment can therefore facilitate mobilization while simultaneously increasing social distance between competing political communities.

The Indonesian context demonstrates how political polarization can acquire both identity-based and emotional dimensions. Research examining Indonesian social media during the 2024 political environment identifies political polarization through differentiated political communities and the circulation of narratives associated with competing political identities (Candra *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, research on Indonesian youth has shown that social identity is relevant to political expression on digital platforms, suggesting that political communication is connected to perceptions of group membership (Venus *et al.*, 2024) ^[20]. These findings indicate that political polarization should not be reduced to competition between candidates or parties. Political conflict may become embedded in broader social identities and symbolic boundaries. When political affiliation becomes associated with particular values, communities, or cultural identities, disagreement can acquire an emotional meaning that extends beyond the original political issue. A disagreement about a policy can consequently become interpreted as a disagreement between social groups. In such circumstances, political communication can reproduce boundaries between “us” and “them,” particularly when messages repeatedly emphasize the moral legitimacy of the ingroup and the deficiencies of the outgroup. The sociological significance of affective polarization therefore lies in its capacity to transform political competition into a broader process of social differentiation.

This transformation has important consequences for how young people interact with political opponents. When political disagreement becomes affective, the willingness to encounter, listen to, or communicate with members of opposing groups may decline. Research by Wakefield *et al.* (2023) ^[22] indicates that affectively polarized individuals may engage in avoidance of political outgroups, demonstrating that polarization can influence not only attitudes but also patterns of social interaction. This finding is particularly relevant in digital environments because social media provides users with considerable opportunities to select their networks and regulate whom they follow or interact with. Consequently, affective polarization may reinforce the fragmented information environments discussed in Section 3.2: selective exposure strengthens group identity, stronger group identity increases emotional distance, and emotional distance may subsequently reduce cross-group interaction. This process should not be interpreted as a universal or irreversible cycle. Cross-cutting interaction can challenge negative assumptions and create opportunities for political learning. Nevertheless, when digital communication repeatedly rewards identity

affirmation and antagonistic responses, political participation may increasingly become oriented toward defending group boundaries rather than discussing public problems. The result is a transformation in the social meaning of participation, from collective problem-solving toward symbolic competition between political identities.

The relationship between affective polarization and political participation is nevertheless more complex than a simple decline in democratic engagement. Social media can motivate citizens to participate precisely because they identify strongly with particular political communities. Collective identity can provide emotional motivation, social support, and a sense of political efficacy. Wahyuningroem *et al.* (2024) ^[23], for example, demonstrate that Indonesian youth were active in digital movements such as #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw, where online communication contributed to broader forms of collective mobilization. This suggests that political identity and emotional attachment can generate participation rather than merely suppress it. The problem arises when participation becomes increasingly dependent on hostility toward political outgroups. Chan and Yi (2024) ^[4] found that the consequences of social media use for political engagement vary according to the broader polarization context. In countries characterized by higher affective polarization, social media use was associated with increased democratic engagement but lower satisfaction with democracy. This finding is important because it demonstrates that increased political activity does not necessarily indicate healthier democratic relations. Citizens may become more active while simultaneously becoming less satisfied with democratic institutions or less accepting of political opponents. A sociological analysis must therefore distinguish between the quantity of political participation and the quality of social relations underlying that participation.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, affective polarization becomes particularly consequential when emotional group boundaries undermine the willingness to recognize opposing citizens as legitimate participants in public discussion. Habermas's conception of the public sphere emphasizes communication oriented toward mutual understanding and rational discussion of matters of common concern. Affective polarization introduces a different communicative logic in which political interaction may become oriented toward affirmation of group identity, delegitimization of opponents, or accumulation of emotional support. This does not mean that emotion has no legitimate place in democratic politics. Political participation is inevitably connected with values, identities, and emotions. The problem emerges when emotional identification becomes so dominant that opposing positions are rejected primarily because of who expresses them rather than because of the substantive arguments presented. In this situation, political disagreement loses its deliberative potential. Research on social media and political engagement likewise indicates that affective polarization can shape the relationship between digital political communication and democratic outcomes (Chan & Yi, 2024). Therefore, the sociological challenge is not to eliminate political disagreement but to prevent disagreement from becoming organized around rigid and antagonistic

social identities. Maintaining opportunities for cross-group communication becomes essential to preserving the possibility of democratic deliberation.

The analysis therefore suggests that the transition from political disagreement to affective polarization should be understood as a process of emotional and social boundary intensification. Young citizens may begin with differences over policies, candidates, or political ideas; however, repeated interaction within politically meaningful networks can connect these differences to identities and social belonging. Once political identities become emotionally salient, opposing citizens may increasingly be evaluated through their perceived group membership rather than through the substance of their political arguments. Digital platforms can facilitate this process by providing continuous spaces for political expression, social validation, and intergroup confrontation, although they do not determine the outcome mechanically. Evidence from Indonesia and comparative research demonstrates that social media can simultaneously facilitate political participation, collective mobilization, group identification, and polarized interaction (Venus *et al.*, 2024; Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024; Lerman *et al.*, 2024) ^[12, 20, 23]. The central issue is therefore not whether young citizens should participate politically through social media, but how the social and emotional structure of that participation shapes their relationships with political others. This leads directly to the next section, which examines how affective polarization transforms the forms, intensity, and orientation of youth political participation in digital and offline political spaces.

Transformation of Youth Political Participation

The emergence of social media has transformed the repertoire of political participation available to young citizens. Political participation is no longer limited to voting, membership in political parties, attending political meetings, or participating in physical demonstrations. Young people can now express political preferences through commenting, reposting, producing videos, joining digital communities, signing online petitions, participating in hashtag campaigns, and sharing political information. These practices represent an expansion of the available repertoire of political action rather than simply a replacement of conventional participation. In Indonesia, research on youth digital movements demonstrates that young citizens have actively connected online communication with offline political mobilization. Wahyuningroem *et al.* (2024) ^[23], for example, found that young people played an active and central role in the #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw movements, with online and offline mobilization reinforcing one another. This evidence challenges the assumption that digital participation is necessarily superficial or disconnected from political action. Instead, social media can provide young citizens with accessible spaces for political expression, collective identification, information exchange, and mobilization. The sociological significance of this transformation therefore lies in how digital practices become incorporated into broader patterns of political participation and collective action.

The transformation of participation can also be understood through the changing relationship between individual expression and collective political action. Traditional political participation often depends upon relatively stable

organizations, such as political parties, student organizations, trade unions, community associations, or social movements. Digital participation enables individuals to enter political discussions without necessarily becoming formal members of such organizations. A young person can participate in a political campaign or social movement simply by sharing a message, using a hashtag, producing political content, or connecting with other users. This lowers some of the organizational barriers to participation and allows political issues to circulate rapidly across social networks. The Indonesian experience of #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw illustrates this process because digital communication helped connect young participants and contributed to the development of offline protest movements (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Social media therefore changes not only the **amount** of political participation but also its organizational form. Participation becomes more networked, decentralized, and potentially temporary. From a sociological perspective, this means that political engagement increasingly occurs through flexible networks in which individual expression can become connected to collective political identities without requiring long-term organizational membership.

One frequently discussed consequence of this transformation is the emergence of **clicktivism**, referring broadly to forms of political engagement that can be performed through relatively low-cost digital actions. Likes, reposts, hashtags, comments, and online petitions require less time and material resources than attending demonstrations or joining political organizations. Such practices have sometimes been criticized because visible online engagement may not necessarily produce substantive political change. However, treating all low-cost digital participation as politically meaningless would overlook its potential mobilizational function. Research conducted in Indonesia demonstrates that online activities can contribute to offline political movements, while offline political events can subsequently stimulate further online engagement (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Similarly, a systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2024, synthesizing 16 studies involving 33,257 participants, concluded that social media can enhance political participation, although the magnitude of the relationship is moderate and strongly dependent on contextual factors (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2024) ^[11]. These findings suggest that digital participation should be evaluated not simply according to the effort required for each individual action, but according to its relationship with political awareness, collective identity, network formation, and subsequent forms of civic engagement.

The transformation becomes particularly significant when digital participation is considered in relation to political identity. Political participation is not merely a behavioral response to political information; it can also function as a way through which individuals communicate social belonging. Sharing a political message, supporting a hashtag, defending a political figure, or criticizing an opposing group can simultaneously communicate an individual's position and identity. The digital environment makes these expressions highly visible to peers, allowing political identities to receive social recognition and reinforcement. Wahyuningroem *et al.* (2024) ^[23] demonstrate that Indonesian youth participation in digital movements was closely related to the development of political identity. This relationship means that participation

can become increasingly identity-oriented. Young citizens may participate not only because they support a particular policy but also because participation confirms their membership in a political community. Such identity-based participation can strengthen solidarity and collective efficacy, but it may also reinforce the boundaries examined in the previous sections. When political participation becomes closely tied to group identity, disagreement with an issue can potentially be interpreted as opposition to the group itself. Thus, the transformation of participation cannot be separated from the development of political identities and affective relationships between political groups.

Digital participation also creates an important distinction between expressive participation and instrumental participation. Expressive participation involves communicating political preferences, emotions, identities, or opinions, while instrumental participation is oriented toward influencing political decisions, mobilizing collective action, or producing institutional change. Social media can facilitate both forms, but the relationship between them is not automatic. A user may express strong political support online without undertaking further political action. Conversely, an apparently simple digital action can become part of a larger mobilization process when it connects individuals to organizations, networks, or collective campaigns. The 2024 meta-analysis by Kurniawan *et al.* indicates that social media's relationship with political participation is moderate rather than universally transformative, reinforcing the importance of examining contextual and social mechanisms. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because it prevents digital participation from being interpreted through a binary distinction between meaningful activism and meaningless clicktivism. The sociological question is instead whether digital expressions become embedded within relationships, identities, and collective processes capable of sustaining political engagement. Participation therefore exists along a continuum, ranging from momentary expression to sustained collective involvement.

A further consequence of digital political participation concerns the possibility of political fatigue and withdrawal. Although social media can lower barriers to participation, continuous exposure to political conflict, hostile communication, and competing political narratives may also make political engagement emotionally demanding. In highly polarized environments, participation may require individuals to repeatedly defend their identities, respond to criticism, or negotiate conflict with political outgroups. Such conditions can encourage some users to reduce their political engagement rather than intensify it. However, the relationship between digital participation and disengagement should not be assumed to be uniform. Kurniawan *et al.* (2024) ^[11] found that the relationship between social media use and political participation varies considerably across contexts, suggesting that social media can support engagement for some users while having more limited effects for others. The sociological implication is that digital participation can produce differentiated patterns of engagement. Some young citizens may become highly active political communicators, while others may remain observers or withdraw from political discussions. Consequently, the expansion of digital political participation does not necessarily mean that political engagement becomes equally distributed across young citizens. Social

networks, political identity, efficacy, information environments, and experiences of political conflict may all influence how individuals respond to the same digital environment.

The relationship between polarization and participation is therefore better understood as dynamic and potentially contradictory. Affective polarization can increase political engagement because strong identification with a political group may motivate individuals to defend their group, disseminate its messages, and mobilize supporters. At the same time, polarization can undermine forms of participation that require communication across political boundaries. Chan and Yi (2024) ^[4] demonstrate that the relationship between social media use and political engagement varies according to the broader context of affective polarization. Their findings suggest that social media may increase political engagement while simultaneously being associated with lower satisfaction with democracy in highly polarized contexts. This distinction is important for the present study because it shows why the quantity of participation cannot be treated as an adequate indicator of democratic quality. A young citizen who frequently comments, reposts, and debates political issues may be highly politically active, but the democratic implications of that activity depend partly on whether the participation promotes political dialogue or reinforces antagonistic identities. Digital participation therefore needs to be evaluated relationally, considering not only whether citizens participate but also how they relate to political others through their participation.

The evidence from Indonesia further demonstrates that the boundary between digital and offline participation is increasingly fluid. The study of #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw found reciprocal connections between online and offline political mobilization, indicating that digital participation can function as an organizational infrastructure for collective action rather than merely an alternative to physical participation (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. This observation challenges the assumption that young people have simply moved away from conventional political participation toward digital substitutes. Instead, digital communication can become integrated with demonstrations, political campaigns, community organization, and other offline activities. The transformation is therefore better described as a hybridization of political participation, in which online and offline practices interact. This hybrid character is especially important for understanding contemporary youth politics because political identities and networks can be constructed online but activated through offline action. Conversely, experiences in physical political spaces can be recorded, interpreted, and circulated digitally, generating further participation. Social media consequently functions as part of a broader political infrastructure rather than as an isolated sphere. The key question becomes whether this hybrid participation strengthens democratic interaction or reproduces the antagonistic boundaries associated with affective polarization.

Overall, the transformation of youth political participation demonstrates that digital politics cannot be reduced either to technological empowerment or to political superficiality. Social media expands the repertoire of political action, lowers some barriers to participation, enables collective identification, and can connect online expression with

offline mobilization. At the same time, participation can become highly expressive, identity-centered, temporary, or emotionally polarized, particularly when political interaction occurs within fragmented networks. Evidence from Indonesia shows that young people are capable of using digital platforms to organize meaningful political movements, while broader research indicates that the relationship between social media use and political participation is moderate and context-dependent (Kurniawan *et al.*, 2024; Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[11, 23]. The central sociological issue is therefore not whether digital participation is replacing conventional participation, but how digital environments are transforming the social organization, identity basis, and relational quality of political engagement. This finding leads to the next analytical issue: the consequences of these transformed participation patterns for democratic deliberation. If young citizens participate more frequently but increasingly through polarized identities and fragmented networks, the question becomes whether such participation strengthens or weakens the capacity of the digital public sphere to sustain dialogue across political differences.

Polarization, Political Fatigue, and Unequal Participation

The transformation of youth political participation through social media should not be understood only in terms of increasing political engagement. Digital participation can also generate emotional exhaustion, cynicism, frustration, and selective withdrawal, particularly when political communication is experienced as repetitive, hostile, or strongly identity-based. From a sociological perspective, political fatigue is therefore better understood as a relational condition emerging from the interaction between individuals, political groups, digital communication environments, and broader political contexts. The same social media environment that facilitates political expression can simultaneously expose users to continuous disagreement, antagonistic exchanges, and emotionally charged political content. Consequently, the relationship between digital media and participation is not linear. Kurniawan *et al.* (2024) ^[11], through a systematic review and meta-analysis of 16 studies involving 33,257 participants in Indonesian psychology research, found that the relationship between social media use and political participation was moderate and highly context-dependent. This finding is important because it indicates that access to political information through social media does not automatically translate into sustained or equally distributed political participation.

Political fatigue can emerge when political engagement becomes emotionally demanding without producing a corresponding sense of efficacy or meaningful social connection. In highly polarized communication environments, users may repeatedly encounter political disputes that are framed through antagonistic identities rather than substantive policy differences. Exposure to hostile political communication may intensify negative emotional responses and contribute to political cynicism. Hasell *et al.* (2024) ^[7], for example, examined exposure to political attacks on social media and found an association between perceived exposure to such attacks, anger, and political cynicism. Although their study was conducted in the United States and should not be directly generalized to

Indonesian youth, it provides a useful analytical indication that the emotional character of political communication matters for how citizens experience political engagement. In the Indonesian context, this suggests that the sociological consequences of digital polarization should be examined not only through the amount of participation but also through the emotional and relational conditions under which participation occurs.

However, political cynicism and fatigue do not necessarily produce complete political withdrawal. Digital environments may also provide alternative forms of participation for individuals who are dissatisfied with conventional political institutions. Ahmed and Masood (2024), studying Singapore, found that political social media use was associated with online political participation and that exposure to political memes could mobilize individuals with relatively high political cynicism into online participation. This finding challenges a simple assumption that cynicism inevitably produces apathy. Instead, cynical citizens may continue participating through alternative communicative forms, including humor, memes, commentary, and other forms of digitally mediated expression. Thus, political fatigue should be conceptualized as a potential transformation in the mode and intensity of participation rather than as an automatic endpoint of disengagement.

The relationship between polarization and participation is similarly more complex than a simple increase-or-decrease model. Chan and Yi (2024) ^[4], using comparative data from 27 developed democracies, found that the relationship between social media use and democratic outcomes varies according to the level of affective polarization. In contexts characterized by higher affective polarization, social media use was associated with greater democratic engagement, including participation and voting, but also with lower satisfaction with democracy. Although the study does not examine Indonesia specifically, its findings are analytically relevant because they demonstrate that increased political participation can coexist with dissatisfaction toward democratic institutions. In other words, a politically active citizen is not necessarily a citizen who experiences political communication as constructive or democratic. Participation may be driven by conflict, identity defense, or opposition to an outgroup while simultaneously weakening positive perceptions of democratic processes.

This distinction becomes particularly important when examining unequal participation among young people. Political polarization can strengthen the participation of individuals who possess strong political identities while making participation more difficult for those who are less politically committed, uncertain, or reluctant to enter hostile discussions. Phillips (2024) ^[16] demonstrates this dynamic in research on affective polarization and political participation in the United States. His findings suggest that affective polarization primarily sustains existing participation habits rather than substantially motivating previously inactive citizens to begin participating. The implication is that polarization may reinforce pre-existing differences in political participation rather than simply expanding participation across the population. Applied cautiously to the Indonesian context, this perspective raises an important sociological question: whose voices become more visible in polarized digital spaces, and whose voices become less

visible because they do not wish to participate in antagonistic political exchanges?

From this perspective, algorithmic curation may interact with existing social inequalities rather than independently determine who participates. Users who are already politically active may generate more political interactions, follow political accounts, and engage more frequently with political content. These patterns can reinforce their visibility within digital networks, while less-engaged users may encounter political content less frequently or may deliberately avoid politically contentious discussions. The resulting environment can produce differences in political visibility and participation that are partly rooted in pre-existing interests, identities, and network relationships. Therefore, the concept of an “unequal digital public sphere” should not be interpreted solely as an outcome of platform algorithms. It is more appropriately understood as a socio-technical process involving platform structures, user choices, political identities, social networks, and patterns of interaction.

For Indonesian youth, this dynamic is particularly significant because social media has become an important arena for political expression and collective mobilization. Research on Indonesian youth has documented how digital activism can connect online expression with offline political action, demonstrating that young people may move between digital and conventional forms of participation rather than choosing one exclusively (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024)^[23]. At the same time, the context-dependent relationship identified by Kurniawan *et al.* (2024)^[11] indicates that social media participation cannot be interpreted uniformly across individuals or situations. Some young people may use digital platforms to strengthen political efficacy and collective identity, while others may reduce their engagement when political communication becomes exhausting, repetitive, or hostile. The sociological significance therefore lies in understanding how different forms of participation are distributed across social groups and how digital interaction shapes the perceived costs and benefits of political involvement.

Taken together, polarization, political fatigue, and unequal participation reveal that digital political participation is not simply a matter of whether young people participate or do not participate. The more important issue concerns the social conditions under which participation is sustained, transformed, or abandoned. Affective polarization may strengthen collective mobilization among politically committed users while simultaneously creating emotional and relational barriers for others. Political fatigue may encourage withdrawal from contentious discussions without necessarily eliminating political interest, while political cynicism may sometimes generate alternative forms of digital expression. The emerging pattern is therefore one of differentiated participation: some users become more politically active, others participate selectively, and some reduce their political visibility. This differentiation provides an important bridge to the deliberative dimension of the study. If participation becomes increasingly organized around identity-based antagonism, the central democratic question is not merely whether young people are politically active, but whether digital political interaction continues to provide opportunities for encountering, recognizing, and engaging with citizens who hold different political positions.

Digital Polarization and the Deliberative Public Sphere

The preceding findings indicate that the relationship between social media and youth political participation cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between political engagement and disengagement. Social media has expanded opportunities for political expression, socialization, mobilization, and collective identity formation, while simultaneously creating conditions in which political communication can become fragmented and emotionally polarized. These dynamics are particularly relevant to Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, in which democratic legitimacy depends not merely on the existence of communication but on opportunities for citizens to exchange reasons, contest claims, and participate as relatively equal interlocutors in processes of opinion and will formation. In the digital environment, however, political communication takes place through platforms whose visibility structures are shaped by algorithms, user networks, interaction histories, and commercial forms of attention. Habermas’s recent reflections on the digital transformation of the public sphere emphasize concerns about fragmentation, privatization, and the changing conditions of political communication. Hoffman (2024) similarly argues that the platformization of communication creates tensions between deliberative political discourse and social-media forms of political branding.

From this perspective, the principal problem is not that young people disagree with one another. Political disagreement is an essential element of democratic communication because deliberation requires competing claims, perspectives, and interpretations to become visible in public discussion. The sociological problem emerges when disagreement is transformed into persistent social antagonism in which political opponents are perceived primarily through group identities rather than through the substantive arguments they advance. The findings discussed in Sections 3.3 and 3.4 indicate that political identity can organize participation and solidarity while simultaneously constructing boundaries between political in-groups and out-groups. When these boundaries become affectively charged, political interaction may shift from evaluating arguments to defending identities. Such a transformation can reduce the possibility of meaningful engagement across political differences even when the volume of political communication increases. Research on online political expression also indicates that cross-cutting exposure can facilitate expression toward opposing viewpoints and, under certain conditions, attenuate attitude extremity and affective polarization (Lee & Cho, 2023).

The concept of the digital public sphere therefore requires attention to the distinction between visibility and deliberation. Social media can make political voices highly visible without necessarily creating the conditions required for deliberative communication. A comment, repost, hashtag, short video, or viral political message constitutes participation in a broad communicative sense, but its democratic significance depends partly on whether it contributes to reciprocal communication, reason-giving, responsiveness, and recognition of alternative viewpoints. Puspitasari’s (2024) qualitative analysis of the 2024 Indonesian presidential campaign illustrates this tension. Her study found that social-media campaigning created extensive opportunities for participation but also showed how political communication could become organized

around symbolic visualization, storytelling, fandom, populism, polarization, and post-truth dynamics. In such circumstances, participation remains present, but its communicative function can shift from deliberating political alternatives toward strengthening identification with particular political communities.

At the same time, the evidence does not support the assumption that algorithmic curation alone determines the quality of democratic deliberation. Large-scale experimental research on Facebook provides an important qualification. Nyhan *et al.* (2023) ^[13] found that like-minded sources constituted a substantial share of users' exposure, but reducing exposure to such sources did not produce measurable changes in several political attitudes, including affective polarization. This finding indicates that changing the informational composition of a feed does not automatically transform political attitudes or relationships. Political identity, existing networks, individual preferences, and patterns of engagement remain relevant. Similarly, Chambers (2023) argues that fragmentation in the digital public sphere should not be understood primarily as a technological problem, emphasizing instead the political processes and actors that contribute to the fragmentation of public communication.

This qualification is important for understanding the Indonesian case because digital political polarization emerges from the interaction of technological and social structures. Algorithmic curation influences what becomes visible, but users also actively select accounts, communities, political narratives, and interaction partners. Political organizations and campaign actors produce strategic messages, while peer networks and social identities influence how these messages are interpreted and circulated. Consequently, the digital public sphere should be conceptualized as a socio-technical arena rather than as a technological system acting independently upon passive users. This interpretation is consistent with the evidence reviewed throughout this study: algorithmic curation can facilitate selective exposure, but selective exposure becomes socially meaningful through political identity, network homophily, affective responses, and patterns of participation.

The Indonesian context further demonstrates that digital communication can simultaneously strengthen and constrain deliberative possibilities. Research on youth political participation shows that online political expression can connect with offline collective action, as illustrated by digital movements surrounding #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw (Wahyuningroem *et al.*, 2024) ^[23]. Meanwhile, the systematic review and meta-analysis by Kurniawan *et al.* (2024) ^[11] demonstrates that the relationship between social media use and political participation among Indonesian populations is moderate and context-dependent rather than uniform. These findings suggest that social media should not be treated simply as either a democratic solution or a democratic threat. Its democratic significance depends on how digital communication is socially organized and whether participation enables citizens to move beyond identity confirmation toward engagement with competing political claims.

From a Habermasian perspective, the central challenge is therefore the maintenance of inclusive and communicatively productive public interaction. An inclusive digital public

sphere requires more than providing everyone with technical access to speak. It also requires conditions in which different social groups can become visible, political claims can be challenged, and participants can encounter perspectives that do not simply reproduce their existing identities. This does not imply that every interaction must result in consensus. Deliberative democracy does not eliminate disagreement; rather, it seeks to establish communicative conditions in which disagreement can be processed through argument, mutual recognition, and public reasoning. Consequently, the problem identified in this study is not polarization as disagreement itself, but the transformation of political disagreement into affective boundaries that reduce the willingness or capacity to engage with political others.

The findings also have implications for understanding youth political participation. The transformation of participation identified in this study suggests that young people are not simply becoming more or less politically active. Instead, their participation is being reorganized through digital forms of socialization, identity construction, emotional attachment, and networked interaction. Some forms of participation become highly visible and collective, while others become selective, episodic, or withdrawn. This differentiation means that measuring participation only through frequency or volume may overlook important changes in the social quality of participation. A young person who frequently shares political content may be highly active but primarily within an ideologically homogeneous network, while another young person may participate less frequently but engage more directly with different political perspectives. From a political-sociological perspective, these differences are significant because they concern not only the quantity of participation but also the structure of social relations through which participation occurs.

The overall argument can therefore be summarized as follows: digital political polarization transforms youth political participation by reorganizing the social conditions of political interaction. Social media functions as an arena of political socialization; algorithmic curation and user practices influence patterns of exposure; political identities organize interpretations and group boundaries; affective polarization can intensify antagonistic relationships; and these processes contribute to differentiated forms of political engagement, fatigue, or withdrawal. The consequence for deliberative democracy is not necessarily the disappearance of political participation, but a possible transformation in its communicative character. When participation becomes increasingly organized around identity affirmation and antagonistic interaction, the capacity of the digital public sphere to facilitate cross-cutting communication may be constrained. Conversely, when digital participation allows citizens to encounter alternative viewpoints, exchange reasons, and connect online expression with broader civic engagement, social media can also expand the communicative infrastructure of democratic participation. The sociological significance of digital polarization therefore lies in this tension between mobilization and fragmentation, visibility and deliberation, identity solidarity and democratic inclusion.

Conclusion

This study shows that digital political polarization among Indonesian youth is not solely a consequence of algorithmic

curation, but emerges through the interaction of social media structures, political identity, patterns of exposure, and networked interaction. Social media provides new spaces for political socialization and participation, while algorithmic curation and selective exposure may reinforce existing social and political boundaries. These processes can strengthen collective engagement, but may also contribute to affective polarization, political fatigue, and differentiated forms of participation. From a political-sociological perspective, the central issue is therefore not whether social media increases or decreases participation, but how it transforms the social relations and identities through which participation occurs. The findings further suggest that the democratic implications of digital polarization depend on whether online political interaction remains open to different perspectives and supports meaningful deliberation. Strengthening critical digital literacy, transparency in platform governance, and inclusive forms of political communication is therefore important for maintaining a more deliberative and socially inclusive digital public sphere.

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