

Media as a Means of Public Communication: Analysis of the Impact of Social Media on the Formation of Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This article aims to deeply analyze the role of social media as a communication tool in building, changing, and even fracturing social relationships in an increasingly digitalized society

Method – This research uses a qualitative approach with a desk study method, examining academic literature published in 2023 and later.

Findings – Social media has been shown to have a dual role: as a catalyst for the formation of collective solidarity and a space for public advocacy, and as a medium prone to misuse to spread hoaxes, hate speech, and social fragmentation. This study examines how social interactions on digital platforms strengthen public participation in public issues such as social justice, public services, and government policy, but also open up opportunities for horizontal conflict due to widespread disinformation and algorithms that reinforce group bias. Key findings indicate that social media not only accelerates the flow of communication between individuals but also shifts the centers of communication power from formal institutions to informal actors, such as influencers, content creators, and online communities. In the context of public relations, social media serves as a bridge across classes, cultures, and geographic regions, although it often creates digital exclusivity that exacerbates social inequalities.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become the backbone of modern communication, shifting the role of conventional media in shaping public narratives, disseminating information, and building social interactions. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and Facebook function not only as

channels for information distribution but also as arenas of social and political dialectics that influence public perceptions and attitudes toward contemporary issues. In a digital society, interactions are no longer limited by space and time; instead, they are simultaneously connected within a dynamic and massive virtual space (Maharani, 2025).

The phenomenon of “No Viral, No Justice” demonstrates that the existence of social media has surpassed its traditional role as a medium of information delivery and has evolved into an instrument of social pressure on formal institutions such as governments, legal bodies, and mainstream media. Viral cases on social media can trigger legal processes, influence policy changes, and mobilize public solidarity (Tutukansa, 2025).

Furthermore, social media provides a digital public sphere that replaces traditional spaces of discussion. Society now utilizes digital media to express opinions, debate ideas, and formulate collective demands, thereby reinforcing the position of social media as a vital element in digital democracy. This aligns with Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, which has undergone transformation through digital platforms to become more inclusive, yet also more vulnerable to algorithmic manipulation (Huda & Abid, 2025).

Activist groups now use social media as a primary tool to raise public awareness and mobilize support for socio-political issues. Their communication strategies no longer target only political elites but also the broader public as agents of social change. In this context, social media is not merely a one-way communication tool but has become a space for resistance, advocacy, and social reconstruction (Haryanto, 2015).

However, the impact of social media on public relations is not entirely positive. Digital propaganda and the role of political buzzers contribute to the formation of public opinion that is often biased, not fact-based, and oriented toward polarization. This indicates that social relationships built in digital spaces can be strengthened, but are also easily fractured due to information manipulation (Opini & Media, 2025).

Several previous studies have shown that social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion in the digital era. Research by Suhendra & Selly Pratiwi (2024) found that the characteristics of social media—such as the speed of information dissemination, interactivity, and content personalization—enable public opinion to form rapidly and widely. However, this condition also presents challenges in the form of polarization and echo chambers, which can reduce the quality of public discourse. Similarly, research by Alfifa et al. (2025) shows that the phenomena of echo chambers and post-truth influence how individuals respond to information. A study on the Instagram account @turnbackhoaxid found that emotions such as anger and distrust often dominate over facts, thereby reinforcing initial beliefs (belief perseverance) and exacerbating the polarization of public opinion.

In a more specific context, research by Izhatullaili et al. (2025) examines the “No Viral, No Justice” phenomenon and finds a shift in the construction of justice. Legal processes no longer rely solely on formal mechanisms but are also influenced by public opinion pressure on social media. This indicates that the digital public sphere is not only a space for participation but also has the potential to transform into a form of trial by the mob driven by collective emotions. These findings

are reinforced by research conducted by Zakki & Aini (2026), which shows that virality on social media can influence the responses of law enforcement agencies. Although social media can function as a tool of social control, reliance on issue popularity risks creating inequality in access to justice and threatens the principles of due process of law and the presumption of innocence.

Based on previous studies, there are several research gaps that remain underexplored. Most studies discuss social media in general contexts such as polarization, echo chambers, and disinformation, but have not specifically linked these issues to the mechanism of virality as a form of social pressure in the “No Viral, No Justice” phenomenon. In addition, previous research is still limited in examining the relationship between emotional factors (such as public anger), social media algorithms, and their impact on the formation of public opinion that eventually develops into social pressure.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how social media plays a role in shaping public opinion, particularly through the “No Viral, No Justice” phenomenon, which can generate social pressure and influence institutional responses. Thus, it is important to further analyze how social media functions as a means of social communication that not only connects individuals and groups but also bridges the relationship between society and institutions.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a literature review method of scholarly articles published since 2023. Data were obtained from accredited journals and university repositories relevant to the research topic.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques. According to David Silverman (2011, as cited in Rozali, 2022), content analysis is the process of categorizing data into specific groups, followed by identifying the occurrence of terms or themes within the text to understand the meanings contained therein. Furthermore, Rozali (2022) explains that content analysis is carried out through several stages: (1) formulating the research problem specifically; (2) determining relevant data sources; (3) establishing operational definitions and units of analysis in accordance with the research focus; (4) developing categories or codes to classify the data; and (5) analyzing the data and systematically compiling the report.

Through this approach, the researcher identifies, categorizes, and interprets patterns of information related to the role of social media in shaping public opinion, particularly in the “No Viral, No Justice” phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Increased Public Participation

Social media has expanded channels for public participation across various domains of life, including public policy, environmental issues, politics, and social advocacy. From the perspective of Jürgen Habermas (as cited in Sari, 2021), public participation ideally occurs within a public sphere that enables rational and open discussion. In the digital context, social media can be understood as

a transformation of this public sphere, where individuals are no longer merely recipients of information but also active agents in expressing opinions.

This participation is evident in the increasing public engagement in responding to public issues through social media. Data from the We Are Social report (2023) indicates that more than 167 million Indonesians are active on social media, many of whom participate in public issues in real time. The phenomenon of virality, which compels rapid institutional responses, reflects a shift in power from formal institutions to digital society. The power of netizens in creating social pressure has been shown to influence legal processes and public policies, representing a new form of digitally based collective participation (Pasaribu, 2025).

Public digital participation in policymaking shows a significant increase, particularly in local and environmental issues. Research reveals that people use social media as a deliberative medium, both to criticize and to propose policies directly to relevant institutions (Suharyanto, 2011).

Environmental activism has also become a focal point. A case in Yogyakarta demonstrates how a waste crisis triggered a wave of digital activism among students, which subsequently influenced a rapid response from local government. The JogjaDarurat Sampah campaign serves as a concrete example of how digital public opinion can create political pressure on decision-making (Dan et al., 2025).

Social media has become a primary instrument in participatory democracy. Studies note that public engagement has increased significantly alongside the emergence of more open and less hierarchical digital spaces (Apriliyani & Wahyudi, 2025). Activist Instagram accounts such as @rahasiagadis play a role in mobilizing young women's participation in issues related to bodily rights and sexuality education, even without formal organizational affiliation (Girsang, 2024).

Studies on Generation Z indicate that TikTok, once considered merely an entertainment platform, has now become an effective channel for political discussion and social advocacy. Gen Z utilizes it to spread political awareness and encourage fellow young voters to actively participate in making political choices (Apriel Simanullang & Prayetno, 2025; Ginting & Pribadi, 2025).

The “No Viral, No Justice” Phenomenon and the Role of Digital Public Opinion

The “No Viral, No Justice” phenomenon reflects a new dynamic in the relationship between society and legal institutions in the digital era. This term refers to the public perception that a case or issue will only be addressed by law enforcement once it goes viral on social media. In this context, social media functions as both a digital public sphere and a social tribunal, where public opinion can generate strong collective pressure on formal institutions.

The power of virality can create a new form of “living law”—a system of norms shaped by public perception rather than solely by written regulations. In studies of various cases, including those of Jessica Wongso and Brigadier J, Maharani emphasizes that digital presence and exposure have become key determinants in driving law enforcement responses. This demonstrates a shift in influence from formal mechanisms to societal pressure through social media (Maharani, 2025).

Digital public opinion is no longer passive but actively shapes narratives, produces digital evidence (such as recordings and screenshots), and demands concrete actions. This creates new

challenges for the principle of due process of law, as viral pressure may push authorities to act quickly to mitigate negative public sentiment, even when investigations are not yet procedurally complete (Tutukansa, 2025).

This phenomenon also highlights a conflict between procedural justice and socio-emotional justice. On one hand, the public feels entitled to oversee justice openly; on the other hand, law enforcement faces a dilemma between responding to public expectations and maintaining procedural objectivity. Social media creates a democratic horizontal communication arena, yet it is also easily manipulated by certain actors to construct artificial public opinion. When social media algorithms prioritize emotional and viral content, the speed of information dissemination becomes more dominant than its validity (Aryanto & Sitorus, 2025).

This phenomenon shows that social media has evolved into a powerful tool of social control. Public pressure generated through virality can serve as an alternative mechanism to drive institutional responses, especially when public trust in formal institutions declines. However, public opinion on social media is often influenced more by emotional factors than rational considerations. Many users engage with or share issues simply because they are trending, without fully understanding the context. This condition makes social pressure unstable and easily swayed by shifting public discourse. Consequently, law enforcement processes risk being influenced by fluctuations in public opinion rather than being based solely on facts and legal procedures.

From a sociological perspective, “No Viral, No Justice” illustrates the power of networked publics in intervening in socio-political structures. In many cases, digital communities demonstrate the ability to shape discourse, influence mainstream media, and even alter the direction of public policy.

Disinformation and Polarization

In digital communication studies, disinformation is understood as information deliberately spread to mislead, while misinformation refers to false information that is not necessarily intended to deceive. This concept is proposed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), as cited in Bustami & Sazali (2025), emphasizing that the spread of information—including unverified content—can pose serious risks to social stability, national security, and public trust in democratic institutions.

Social media plays a dual role in the modern communication landscape: as a catalyst for public participation and as a site of digital conflict. One of the most prominent impacts of social media use is the widespread dissemination of disinformation, hoaxes, and the emergence of social divisions (polarization), particularly in political, legal, and cultural issues.

The spread of false information designed to provoke public emotions has intensified social fragmentation. In the context of elections or policy conflicts, hoaxes not only spread falsehoods but also shape deeply rooted opinions based on group identities (Aziz, 2025).

Studies observe that Indonesian youth are highly exposed to fake news on social media, especially during political periods. Polarization arises because social media algorithms reinforce echo

chambers, where users are only exposed to content that supports their existing views, thereby narrowing spaces for dialogue between groups (Dava & Hanafiah, 2024).

Polarization in digital spaces extends beyond politics to cultural and religious issues. Provocative or discriminatory content spreads more rapidly, exacerbating social tensions (Romadhona et al., n.d.). Identity-based movements (ethnic, religious, political) on social media contribute to digital segregation, where communities become increasingly closed off from differing perspectives. This condition has the potential to undermine long-term social cohesion (Muhammad et al., 2025).

Disinformation not only creates horizontal polarization but also poses a threat to national resilience. Through technology-based strategic communication, political and foreign actors can easily disseminate agendas through social networks without censorship barriers (Sarjito, 2024). Hoaxes related to cultural or local issues are often used to generate distrust toward the government or other groups, particularly ahead of political contests (Cahyani, 2025). Efforts by the Indonesian National Police (Polri) through the Cooling System program on social media face significant challenges due to waves of disinformation that spread faster than official clarifications (Hanindita et al., 2025).

The Role of Social Media in Building Interaction and Public Opinion

Social media has transformed the relationship between individuals, groups, and institutions in the digital world. Platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp Business, and TikTok are now used not only for promotion but also as tools for building loyal and interactive customer communities that enable two-way communication. The relationships formed are no longer one-directional but are based on social interaction rooted in values, trust, and sustained engagement.

Social media strengthens users' attachment to specific issues. When users comment, share content, or engage in discussions, they indirectly contribute to shaping collective perceptions that develop into public opinion. Research shows that active user interaction can increase engagement with an issue, thereby accelerating the formation of collective opinion and institutional responses (Zordi et al., 2024).

Moreover, social media encourages the formation of digital communities based on shared interests, experiences, or perspectives. These communities play a crucial role in reinforcing emerging opinions through repeated and intensive interaction. In many cases, users tend to trust information from their community more than from other sources, allowing opinions to spread more quickly and widely (Silitonga & Khatibah, 2023; Sitorus & Khatibah, 2024).

However, strong attachment within digital communities also presents challenges. Interactions within homogeneous groups can lead to less critical communication patterns, where information is accepted without thorough verification. This phenomenon is known as an echo chamber, a condition in which social media users are only exposed to and trust information that aligns with their existing views (Taufik, 2026). In such situations, users tend to interact with like-minded individuals, limiting exposure to differing perspectives. This communication pattern

ultimately reinforces existing beliefs while hindering the exchange of more diverse and constructive ideas.

Furthermore, the dynamics of interaction on social media show that public opinion is not formed neutrally but is influenced by communication intensity, social proximity, and the way information is packaged and disseminated. Content that is emotional, provocative, or relevant to users' experiences tends to attract more attention and trigger responses, thus having a greater potential to shape public opinion broadly (Auliani & Nuswantari, 2025).

Thus, social media functions not only as a communication tool but also as a space that actively shapes, reinforces, and disseminates public opinion through user interactions (Batubara et al., 2025; Siagian et al., 2024). This condition is important to understand because it is directly related to how digital public opinion can evolve into social pressure, as seen in the "No Viral, No Justice" phenomenon, where the power of interaction and virality can significantly influence institutional responses.

CONCLUSION

Social media has shaped a new communication landscape that is horizontal, instantaneous, and open. Unlike conventional media, which is one-way and centralized, communication through social media is two-way and participatory. Society is no longer merely a consumer of information but also a producer of content (prosumer), with the capacity to influence discourse, shape public opinion, and even mobilize social movements.

In the context of public relations, social media functions as a bridge connecting individuals and groups from diverse social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. Communication built through social media can strengthen digital solidarity, expand social networks, and foster a sense of collective belonging across social, economic, and political issues. Digital spaces also serve as channels for self-expression, reflecting the plurality of identities and diversity of voices.

However, the intensity and speed of communication on social media do not always result in healthy relationships. Behind the ease of connectivity lies the risk of social fragmentation, disinformation, and the formation of opinions based on emotional perceptions rather than facts. Communication in digital spaces is often vulnerable to polarization, mass misinformation, and the exploitation of algorithms by certain actors for political or economic interests.

Social media communication also tends to be superficial if not accompanied by critical understanding. The simplification of issues through viral content such as memes, clickbait, or one-sided framing can obscure substantive issues and fuel horizontal conflict. Therefore, it is important for social media users to possess digital literacy, not only in technical skills but also in critical understanding of the dynamics of digital communication.

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