

Generation Z Political Engagement in Tanzania (2022–2025): Consequences for Political Polarization and Social Cohesion

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Abstrak

Studi kualitatif ini meneliti kemunculan dan penguatan keterlibatan politik Generasi Z (Gen Z) di Tanzania antara tahun 2022 sampai 2025, dengan perhatian khusus terhadap implikasinya terhadap polarisasi politik dan kohesi sosial. Sebagai generasi termuda yang aktif secara politik di Tanzania, Gen Z semakin mengandalkan platform digital, jaringan informal, dan aktivisme berbasis isu untuk berpartisipasi dalam diskursus politik dan kehidupan bermasyarakat. Berdasarkan analisis dokumen kualitatif, analisis wacana konten media sosial, pernyataan kebijakan, laporan media, dan literatur ilmiah terkait, artikel ini mengeksplorasi bentuk-bentuk, narasi dominan, dan implikasi sosial yang lebih luas dari keterlibatan politik Gen Z. Studi ini berargumen bahwa politik Gen Z di Tanzania menunjukkan transformasi signifikan dalam pola partisipasi politik, yang ditandai oleh aktivisme yang dimediasi secara digital, pembungkaman identitas generasi, dan tuntutan kuat terhadap akuntabilitas dari elit politik. Meskipun perkembangan ini memperluas suara politik, kesadaran sipil, dan inklusi di kalangan muda, secara bersamaan juga memperkuat polarisasi politik, meningkatkan ketegangan antar generasi, dan berkontribusi pada fragmentasi diskursus publik. Temuan menunjukkan paradoks utama: keterlibatan politik Gen Z meningkatkan partisipasi demokratis sekaligus menimbulkan tantangan terhadap kohesi sosial dan politik deliberatif. Dengan menempatkan kasus Tanzania dalam kerangka diskusi yang lebih luas tentang politik pemuda dan demokrasi digital di Afrika, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi baik secara empiris maupun teoretis terhadap kajian sosialisasi politik, ruang publik digital, dan kohesi sosial. Studi ini diakhiri dengan penekanan pada pentingnya saluran kelembagaan yang inklusif, pendidikan kewarganegaraan digital, dan strategi pemerintahan yang berorientasi dialog untuk memanfaatkan potensi demokratis Generasi Z sekaligus mengurangi efek polarisasinya.

Kata kunci: Generasi Z; Pemuda dan Politik; Tanzania; Polarisasi Politik; Kohesi Sosial; Aktivisme Digital

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the emergence and consolidation of Generation Z (Gen Z) political engagement in Tanzania between 2022 and 2025, with particular attention to its implications for political polarization and social cohesion. As Tanzania's youngest politically active generation, Gen Z has increasingly relied on digital platforms, informal networks, and issue-based activism to participate in political discourse and civic life. Drawing on qualitative document analysis, discourse analysis of social media content, policy statements, media reports, and relevant scholarly literature, the article explores the forms, dominant narratives, and broader societal implications of Gen Z political engagement. The study argues that Gen Z politics in Tanzania represents a significant transformation in patterns of political participation, characterized by digitally mediated activism, generational identity framing, and strong demands for accountability directed at political elites. While these developments have expanded political voice, civic awareness, and inclusion among young people, they have simultaneously intensified political polarization, heightened generational tensions, and contributed to the fragmentation of public discourse. The findings reveal a central paradox: Gen Z political engagement enhances democratic participation while at the same time posing challenges to social cohesion and deliberative politics. By situating the Tanzanian case within broader debates on youth politics and digital democracy in Africa, the article contributes both empirically and theoretically to scholarship on political socialization, digital public spheres, and social cohesion. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of inclusive institutional channels, digital civic education, and dialogue-oriented governance strategies to harness the democratic potential of Generation Z while mitigating its polarizing effects.

Keywords: Generation Z; Youth Politics; Tanzania; Political Polarization; Social Cohesion; Digital Activism

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INTRODUCTION

Youth have long played a critical role in shaping political change, contesting authority, and redefining civic engagement across societies. In Africa, young people constitute a demographic majority in many countries,

yet they often remain politically marginalized within formal institutions.¹ In recent years, however, the political landscape has been transformed by the rise of Generation Z, a cohort whose political engagement is deeply shaped by digital technologies, globalized narratives, and informal modes of participation.² Tanzania provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics, given its youthful population, expanding digital connectivity, and evolving state society relations between 2022 and 2025.

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, differs from previous generations in both socialization and political practice. Unlike earlier youth cohorts that relied heavily on political parties, student unions, and mass organizations, Gen Z increasingly engages in politics through social media platforms, online communities, and issue-based campaigns.³ These spaces function not only as channels for political expression but also as arenas for identity construction, mobilization, and contestation. In Tanzania, Gen Z has used digital platforms to debate governance, economic inequality, corruption, education, employment, and freedom of expression, thereby reshaping public discourse.

The period between 2022 and 2025 marks a significant phase in Tanzania's contemporary politics. During this time, public debate expanded, digital participation intensified, and young people became more visible in political discussions. Gen Z political engagement emerged alongside broader conversations on democratic governance, accountability, and citizen participation. While this engagement has been widely celebrated as evidence of political awakening among youth, it has also generated concern regarding the quality of political discourse, the spread of misinformation, and the intensification of ideological divisions.⁴

¹ Resnick, D., & Casale, D. (2011). The political participation of Africa's youth: Turnout, partisanship, and protest.

² Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. Cambridge University Press.

³ Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22(2), 147–162.

⁴ Morozov, E. (2011). The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom. PublicAffairs.

Political polarization has become an increasingly salient feature of contemporary politics globally, and Tanzania is no exception. Polarization refers to the process through which political attitudes and identities become more divided, antagonistic, and resistant to compromise.⁵ In digital environments, polarization is often amplified by algorithmic incentives that reward sensationalism and emotional expression. For Gen Z, whose political participation is largely mediated through digital platforms, these dynamics have important implications for how political disagreement is expressed and managed.

At the same time, social cohesion remains a central concern for plural societies such as Tanzania. Social cohesion encompasses trust, shared identity, mutual tolerance, and a sense of belonging among members of society.⁶ While youth political participation can strengthen cohesion by promoting inclusion and voice, it can also undermine cohesion when political engagement becomes exclusionary, confrontational, or generationally divisive.⁷ Understanding how Gen Z political engagement affects social cohesion is therefore crucial for assessing its broader societal impact.

Despite growing interest in youth and digital politics, there remains limited qualitative research focusing specifically on Generation Z in Tanzania. Existing studies often address youth participation in general terms or emphasize electoral behavior, leaving a gap in understanding the discursive, cultural, and social dimensions of Gen Z politics. This article seeks to address this gap by providing a qualitative analysis of Gen Z political engagement and its consequences for political polarization and social cohesion between 2022 and 2025.

The study is guided by three central research questions. First, how has Generation Z engaged in politics in Tanzania during the period under review? Second, what qualitative characteristics define Gen Z political

⁵ Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

⁶ Chan, J., To, H. P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.

⁷ Honwana, A. (2012). *The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa*. Kumarian Press.

discourse and modes of mobilization? Third, what are the implications of this engagement for political polarization and social cohesion? By addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to scholarly debates on youth politics, digital activism, and democratic governance in Africa.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on youth politics, Generation Z, digital political engagement, and political polarization. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. The methodology section outlines the qualitative research design and analytical approach. Subsequent sections present and discuss the findings, focusing on forms of engagement, discursive characteristics, and social consequences. The article concludes with reflections on theoretical contributions, policy implications, and directions for future research.

Youth and Political Participation in Africa

Youth political participation in Africa has been widely analyzed through the lenses of marginalization, demographic pressure, and political exclusion. Despite constituting a numerical majority in many African countries, young people often face limited access to formal political institutions, leadership positions, and decision-making processes.⁸ This structural exclusion has shaped distinctive patterns of youth political engagement, frequently characterized by protest, informal mobilization, and non-institutional participation rather than sustained involvement in political parties or state institutions.

Scholars argue that African youth politics must be understood within broader socio-economic conditions, including unemployment, precarity, and uneven development.⁹ These conditions contribute to what Honwana (2012) describes as a state of “waithood,” in which young people experience prolonged transitions to adulthood and political voice. As a result, political engagement among youth often emerges as a response to

⁸ Resnick, D., & Casale, D. (2011). The political participation of Africa’s youth: Turnout, partisanship, and protest.

⁹ Honwana, A. (2012). The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa. Kumarian Press.

frustration with political elites and governance systems perceived as unresponsive to youth needs.

Empirical studies demonstrate that African youth participation is not inherently apathetic but rather selectively engaged. Young people tend to mobilize around issues that directly affect their livelihoods, such as employment, education, corruption, and access to public services.¹⁰ Youth movements and protests across the continent illustrate how young people utilize both formal and informal channels to express political demands. However, such movements often face challenges of sustainability, repression, and co-optation by political elites.

The literature further highlights the ambivalent relationship between youth activism and democratic consolidation. On the one hand, youth participation can enhance democratic accountability and inclusion; on the other hand, it may also generate instability when political engagement becomes confrontational or detached from institutional mediation.¹¹ This tension is particularly evident in contexts where political institutions lack mechanisms for integrating youth voices into formal decision-making processes.

In Tanzania, existing research on youth politics has primarily focused on electoral participation, party youth wings, and civic education programs.¹² While these studies provide valuable insights, they often understate the role of informal and digital political engagement. As such, there remains a gap in understanding how contemporary youth, particularly Generation Z, engage in politics beyond traditional structures and how such engagement reshapes political discourse and social relations.

Generation Z and Digital Political Engagement

Generation Z represents a distinct cohort within youth politics due to its deep integration with digital technologies and social media platforms. Scholars note that Gen Z political engagement is shaped by constant connectivity, rapid information flows, and the personalization of political

¹⁰ Abbink, J. (2005). *Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal*. Brill.

¹¹ Resnick, D. (2014). *Urban poverty and party populism in African democracies*. Cambridge University Press.

¹² Paget, D. (2017). *The rally-intensive campaign: A look at Tanzanian elections*.

expression.¹³ Digital platforms enable young people to bypass traditional gatekeepers of political communication, allowing for decentralized and networked forms of activism.

Digital political engagement among Gen Z is often characterized by issue-based mobilization, visual communication, and emotionally resonant narratives.¹⁴ Hashtags, memes, and short-form videos function as tools for political expression and collective identity formation. These practices blur the boundaries between political participation, cultural production, and everyday social interaction.

While digital platforms expand opportunities for participation, scholars caution against overly optimistic interpretations of digital activism. Critics argue that online engagement may encourage superficial participation, short-lived mobilization, and weak organizational capacity.¹⁵ Furthermore, algorithmic curation of content can reinforce ideological homogeneity and limit exposure to opposing viewpoints, thereby contributing to political polarization.¹⁶

Research on Gen Z political behavior also emphasizes the role of identity and generational consciousness. Political claims are frequently framed in generational terms, positioning youth as agents of change in opposition to perceived elite or “old politics”.¹⁷ While such framing can empower young people, it may also deepen generational divides and undermine intergenerational dialogue.

In African contexts, digital political engagement is shaped by uneven access to technology, state regulation of online spaces, and varying levels of digital literacy.¹⁸ In Tanzania, the expansion of mobile internet has

¹³ Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22(2), 147–162.

¹⁵ Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*. PublicAffairs.

¹⁶ Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁷ Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy*. Atria Books.

¹⁸ Bosch, T. (2017). *Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: The case of #RhodesMustFall*.

facilitated youth participation in online political discourse, yet regulatory frameworks and political sensitivities continue to influence the scope and nature of digital activism. Existing literature has not sufficiently examined how these dynamics specifically affect Generation Z, underscoring the need for qualitative, context-sensitive research.

Political Polarization and Social Cohesion

Political polarization has emerged as a central concern in contemporary political analysis. Polarization refers to the increasing ideological distance and antagonism between political groups, often accompanied by declining tolerance for opposing views.¹⁹ Scholars argue that digital media environments intensify polarization by privileging emotionally charged content and facilitating selective exposure.²⁰

Social cohesion, by contrast, emphasizes social trust, shared identity, and a sense of belonging among members of society.²¹ High levels of social cohesion are associated with political stability, cooperation, and democratic resilience. However, polarization can undermine cohesion by fragmenting public discourse and weakening shared norms.

In African societies, polarization often intersects with generational, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions.²² Youth-led political engagement may both challenge exclusionary politics and introduce new fault lines within society. Yet, limited research has explored how Generation Z contributes to these dynamics, particularly through digital forms of engagement.

This literature review highlights three key gaps. First, there is limited qualitative research on Generation Z political engagement in Tanzania. Second, existing studies often fail to integrate youth politics with theories of polarization and social cohesion. Third, the social consequences of digital youth activism remain underexplored in African contexts.

¹⁹ Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

²⁰ Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States.

²¹ Chan, J., To, H. P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.

²² Cheeseman, N. (2018). *How to rig an election*. Yale University Press.

Addressing these gaps, this study situates Gen Z political engagement within broader debates on democracy, digital media, and social cohesion

Political Socialization Theory

Political socialization theory explains how individuals acquire political orientations, values, and behaviors through interactions with social institutions, media, and peer networks.²³ Traditionally, family, schools, political parties, and mass media have been considered primary agents of political socialization. However, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the growing role of digital media in shaping political attitudes, particularly among younger generations.²⁴

For Generation Z, political socialization is deeply embedded in digital environments. Social media platforms function not only as sources of information but also as spaces for debate, identity construction, and normative learning. Through repeated exposure to political narratives, symbols, and peer interactions, Gen Z develops political attitudes that are often more critical of authority and less deferential to traditional institutions.²⁵ In Tanzania, where formal civic education has limited reach, digital platforms increasingly serve as alternative arenas of political learning.

Political socialization theory is particularly relevant to this study because it helps explain why Gen Z exhibits distinct political behaviors compared to older cohorts. The theory illuminates how digitally mediated experiences shape perceptions of legitimacy, accountability, and participation. By applying this framework, the study analyzes how Gen Z political discourse reflects broader shifts in political values and expectations within Tanzanian society.

Digital Public Sphere Theory

Digital public sphere theory builds on Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere as a space for rational-critical debate among citizens.

²³ Jennings, M. K., & Niemi, R. G. (1981). *Generations and politics: A panel study of young adults and their parents*. Princeton University Press.

²⁴ Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524–538.

²⁵ Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies*, 56(1), 76–98.

Scholars argue that digital media has transformed the nature of the public sphere by expanding participation while simultaneously fragmenting discourse.²⁶ Online platforms enable diverse voices to enter political debates but often lack the institutional norms that support deliberation and consensus-building.

For Generation Z, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok constitute primary political public spheres. These spaces are characterized by speed, visual communication, and emotional expression. While digital public spheres lower barriers to participation, they also encourage performative politics and amplify conflictual narratives.²⁷ Algorithmic curation further shapes visibility and engagement, privileging content that generates strong emotional reactions.²⁸

In the Tanzanian context, digital public sphere theory helps explain how Gen Z political engagement has reconfigured political communication. Online debates allow young people to challenge political elites, circulate alternative narratives, and mobilize support beyond formal institutions. At the same time, the fragmentation of digital public spheres complicates the formation of shared political understandings, contributing to polarization and misunderstanding.

Social Cohesion Theory

Social cohesion theory focuses on the degree of trust, solidarity, and shared identity within a society.²⁹ High levels of social cohesion are associated with political stability, cooperation, and democratic resilience. Conversely, declining cohesion may result in social fragmentation, exclusion, and conflict.

Political engagement plays an ambivalent role in social cohesion. Inclusive participation can strengthen cohesion by fostering a sense of

²⁶ Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22(2), 147–162.

²⁷ Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

²⁸ Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

²⁹ Chan, J., To, H. P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.

belonging and collective purpose, while exclusionary or antagonistic politics may undermine trust and social bonds.³⁰ In digitally mediated contexts, the relationship between participation and cohesion becomes more complex due to the rapid circulation of divisive narratives and the weakening of traditional mediating institutions.

Applying social cohesion theory enables this study to assess the broader societal implications of Gen Z political engagement in Tanzania. The framework highlights how generational framing, polarized discourse, and distrust in institutions affect intergroup relations and collective identity. By linking youth political participation to cohesion outcomes, the study moves beyond participation-focused analyses to consider the quality and consequences of engagement.

Integrating the Frameworks

The integration of political socialization, digital public sphere, and social cohesion theories provides a robust analytical lens for this study. Political socialization theory explains how Gen Z acquires distinct political orientations; digital public sphere theory accounts for the communicative spaces through which engagement occurs; and social cohesion theory assesses the societal effects of these processes. Together, these frameworks guide the analysis of how Generation Z political engagement between 2022 and 2025 reshapes political discourse, intensifies polarization, and influences social cohesion in Tanzania.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the meanings, narratives, and social implications of Generation Z political engagement in Tanzania between 2022 and 2025. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining political discourse, identity construction, and contextual interpretations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures.³¹ By prioritizing depth over breadth, the study seeks to understand how Gen Z actors interpret political

³⁰ Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster

³¹ Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

events, articulate grievances, and negotiate collective identities within digitally mediated spaces.

The research is interpretivist in orientation, recognizing that political realities are socially constructed through language, symbols, and interaction.³² This approach allows the study to analyze political engagement as a dynamic process shaped by historical context, power relations, and communicative practices. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study aims to generate analytically grounded insights into the nature and consequences of Gen Z political engagement.

Data were drawn from multiple qualitative sources to enhance analytical richness and triangulation.³³ First, the study analyzed official documents and policy statements, including government speeches, parliamentary debates, and policy communications related to youth, governance, and digital regulation during the 2022–2025 period. These documents provide insight into institutional responses to youth political engagement.

Second, media content was examined, including national newspapers, online news platforms, and opinion columns. Media sources were selected purposively to capture diverse political perspectives and narratives surrounding youth activism and digital politics. Third, publicly available social media content from platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok was analyzed. The focus was on posts, hashtags, and short videos produced or amplified by young users that addressed political issues, governance debates, and civic concerns.

Sampling followed a purposive and theoretical logic rather than probabilistic representativeness.³⁴ Content was selected based on relevance to the research questions, visibility, and engagement levels. This strategy ensured that the analysis focused on influential narratives and discursive patterns while remaining attentive to contextual diversity.

The study employed a combination of thematic analysis and qualitative discourse analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring

³² Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. Routledge.

³³ Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 6(2), 80–88.

³⁴ Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

patterns, themes, and categories across the data.³⁵ Initial coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data, followed by a more deductive phase informed by the theoretical framework. This iterative process facilitated the identification of dominant forms of engagement, discursive strategies, and perceived social impacts.

Discourse analysis complemented thematic analysis by examining how language, symbols, and framing were used to construct political meaning.³⁶ Particular attention was paid to generational narratives, representations of political authority, and expressions of inclusion and exclusion. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of how Gen Z political actors articulate identity and contest power within digital public spheres.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation across data sources and analytical methods.³⁷ Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and interpretive role. Thick description was used to contextualize findings and support analytical credibility.

Ethical considerations were addressed by relying exclusively on publicly accessible data and anonymizing identifiable individuals where necessary. The study avoided attributing intent or motivation to specific actors and focused on discursive patterns rather than personal characteristics.³⁸

The study has limitations. The reliance on publicly available digital content may exclude private or offline forms of engagement. Additionally, the qualitative design does not allow for generalization beyond the studied context. Nevertheless, the methodology is well suited to generating in-depth insights into the nature and consequences of Gen Z political engagement in Tanzania.

³⁵ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

³⁶ Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

³⁷ Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

³⁸ Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). *Ethical decision-making and Internet research*. Association of Internet Researchers.

This section presents and analyzes the key findings of the study based on thematic and discourse analysis of documents, media reports, and digital content produced between 2022 and 2025. The findings are organized around four major themes: forms of Generation Z political engagement, dominant digital narratives, state–youth relations, and implications for social cohesion. The analysis is guided by the theoretical framework outlined earlier and situates empirical observations within broader scholarly debates.

The findings indicate that Generation Z in Tanzania engages in politics through diverse and largely informal channels that differ significantly from traditional modes of participation. Rather than relying primarily on political parties, youth wings, or formal civic organizations, Gen Z actors favor digitally mediated practices such as hashtag activism, online commentary, short-form video production, and issue-based mobilization. These practices reflect broader global trends in youth participation characterized by personalization, flexibility, and skepticism toward institutional politics (Dalton, 2008; Bennett, 2012).

Social media platforms function as primary arenas of political expression. Hashtags related to governance, economic hardship, accountability, and youth marginalization are frequently used to aggregate attention and frame political grievances. Through memes, satire, and short videos, Gen Z actors translate complex political issues into accessible and emotionally resonant content. This style of engagement prioritizes visibility and resonance over formal deliberation, reflecting the affordances of digital platforms.³⁹

At the same time, offline political engagement has not disappeared but is often coordinated or amplified online. Digital platforms are used to publicize meetings, protests, and civic initiatives, blurring the boundary between online and offline participation. This hybrid form of engagement supports the argument that digital activism should not be dismissed as

³⁹ Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

superficial but understood as embedded within broader repertoires of contention.⁴⁰

Analysis of Gen Z political discourse reveals several dominant narratives. One prominent narrative center on generational injustice, emphasizing unequal access to employment, political influence, and economic opportunity. Political authority is frequently portrayed as distant, unresponsive, or captured by entrenched elites. This framing constructs a moral distinction between “the youth” and “the establishment,” reinforcing generational boundaries within political discourse.

Another recurring narrative emphasizes transparency and accountability. Gen Z actors frequently reference corruption, misuse of public resources, and lack of responsiveness as key political problems. These claims are often supported by circulating screenshots, video clips, and excerpts from official statements, illustrating how digital media enables alternative forms of evidence-making and counter-narratives.⁴¹

Discursively, Gen Z political communication is marked by irony, sarcasm, and moralized language. While these strategies enhance engagement and shareability, they also contribute to discursive polarization. Political opponents are frequently represented through simplified or antagonistic frames, limiting opportunities for deliberation and mutual understanding.⁴² This finding supports concerns that digitally mediated public spheres may amplify conflictual dynamics even as they expand participation.

The findings suggest an increasingly complex and ambivalent relationship between the state and Gen Z political actors. On one hand, official rhetoric frequently emphasizes youth inclusion, innovation, and participation. Policy documents and speeches highlight the importance of young people in national development and digital transformation. On the

⁴⁰ Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

⁴¹ Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Polity Press.

⁴² Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

other hand, regulatory practices and public responses to online activism often reflect suspicion and concern regarding dissent and misinformation.

Digital regulation emerges as a key site of contestation. Policies aimed at managing online content, combating misinformation, and maintaining public order are interpreted by many Gen Z actors as attempts to constrain political expression. This perception contributes to distrust in institutions and reinforces narratives of exclusion. Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts where digital governance intersects with youth activism.⁴³

The tension between inclusionary discourse and restrictive practices shapes Gen Z political engagement. Rather than withdrawing from politics, many young actors adapt by employing coded language, humor, and indirect critique to navigate regulatory constraints. This adaptive behavior highlights the resilience of youth political engagement while also underscoring the structural limitations imposed by the political environment.

The impact of Gen Z political engagement on social cohesion is mixed and context-dependent. On one hand, digital activism fosters solidarity among young people by creating shared spaces of identification and collective grievance. Online communities enable mutual support, political learning, and a sense of belonging, which are important components of social cohesion.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the strong generational framing evident in Gen Z discourse risks deepening intergenerational divides. Older political actors are frequently portrayed as obstacles to change, while youth identities are constructed in oppositional terms. Such framing may undermine trust across age groups and weaken shared national narratives.⁴⁵

Moreover, polarized digital discourse may spill over into offline relations, contributing to social fragmentation. The absence of effective

⁴³ Freedom House. (2023). *Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence*. Freedom House.

⁴⁴ Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

⁴⁵ Chan, J., To, H. P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.

mediating institutions capable of bridging generational and ideological divides exacerbates these dynamics. The findings thus suggest that while Gen Z political engagement expands participation, it also poses challenges for maintaining social cohesion in Tanzania.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Generation Z and Political Socialization in the Digital Era

The findings confirm the relevance of political socialization theory in explaining the distinct political orientations of Generation Z. Unlike older cohorts whose political attitudes were shaped primarily through family, schools, and party structures, Gen Z's political learning is deeply embedded in digital environments. Social media platforms function as primary agents of political socialization, shaping norms of participation, expectations of accountability, and interpretations of legitimacy (Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Boulianne, 2015).

The study shows that Gen Z political engagement is characterized by skepticism toward formal institutions and a preference for issue-based activism. This aligns with Dalton's (2008) argument that younger generations increasingly adopt assertive forms of citizenship that prioritize voice over loyalty. In Tanzania, these orientations are reinforced by perceptions of limited institutional responsiveness, leading Gen Z actors to seek alternative spaces for political expression.

Digital Public Spheres and the Transformation of Political Discourse

The findings also contribute to debates on the digital public sphere. While digital platforms expand access to political discussion, they simultaneously fragment discourse and intensify polarization. Consistent with Dahlgren (2005) and Papacharissi (2015), the study finds that Gen Z political communication privileges emotion, visibility, and speed over deliberative rationality.

Algorithmic amplification plays a significant role in shaping political discourse. Content that is provocative, humorous, or morally charged is more likely to circulate widely, reinforcing antagonistic framing and reducing opportunities for consensus-building.⁴⁶ These dynamics challenge

⁴⁶ Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.

normative assumptions about the democratizing potential of digital media and highlight the need to assess not only participation levels but also communicative quality.

State Power, Regulation, and Youth Adaptation

The relationship between the state and Gen Z political actors reflects broader tensions between governance and dissent in the digital age. The findings illustrate how regulatory approaches aimed at controlling online content are interpreted by young people as restrictive, contributing to distrust and oppositional identities. This supports scholarship emphasizing that digital governance often produces unintended consequences by motivating adaptive and covert forms of activism.⁴⁷

Rather than disengaging, Gen Z actors demonstrate resilience by adopting indirect forms of critique, satire, and coded language. These strategies allow continued participation while navigating regulatory constraints, underscoring the adaptive capacity of youth political engagement under conditions of constraint.

Implications for Social Cohesion and Democratic Governance

From a social cohesion perspective, the findings reveal a paradox. Gen Z political engagement strengthens intra-generational solidarity while simultaneously risking intergenerational fragmentation. The strong generational narratives identified in the analysis may undermine shared political identities and trust across age groups.⁴⁸

However, the study also suggests that exclusionary governance practices exacerbate polarization by reinforcing youth perceptions of marginalization. Inclusive political institutions and responsive governance could mitigate these dynamics by channeling youth participation into constructive dialogue. This reinforces Putnam's (2000) argument that participation alone is insufficient; the institutional context in which participation occurs is critical for sustaining social cohesion

⁴⁷ Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

⁴⁸ Chan, J., To, H. P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the nature and consequences of Generation Z political engagement in Tanzania between 2022 and 2025 using a qualitative, theory-driven approach. The findings demonstrate that Gen Z political participation is digitally mediated, discursively innovative, and socially consequential. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for youth voice, they have also intensified polarization and challenged social cohesion.

The study contributes to the literature by integrating political socialization theory, digital public sphere theory, and social cohesion theory to analyze youth politics in an African context. It shows that Gen Z political engagement cannot be understood solely in terms of participation rates but must be evaluated in relation to communicative practices, institutional responses, and societal effects.

First, policymakers should recognize digital platforms as central arenas of political socialization and engagement for young people. Rather than viewing online activism primarily as a threat, governments should invest in digital civic education that promotes critical literacy, respectful dialogue, and ethical participation.

Second, regulatory frameworks governing digital spaces should balance public order with freedom of expression. Transparent and participatory approaches to digital regulation could reduce distrust and foster cooperation between youth and state institutions.

Third, political institutions should create meaningful channels for youth participation that extend beyond symbolic inclusion. Structured dialogue platforms, youth advisory councils, and inclusive policy consultations could help bridge generational divides and strengthen social cohesion.

Generation Z represents a transformative political force in Tanzania. Harnessing this potential requires institutional openness, inclusive governance, and recognition of the changing nature of political participation in the digital age. Failure to address these dynamics risks deepening polarization and undermining democratic resilience.

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