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Indonesian Scientific Publication

Viral Politics and Platform Power: TikTok's Role in Shaping Electoral Discourse in Southeast Asia

Ajeng Iva Dwi Febriana[1], Sirajul Rahman[2]
[1]Universitas Jayabaya, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Muhammadiyah Palangkaraya, Indonesia
Correspondent: febrianaiva04@gmail.com[1]

ABSTRACT: This study examines how TikTok has transformed political campaigning and discourse in Southeast Asia, focusing on the 2022 and 2024 elections in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Using qualitative content analysis of TikTok content tagged with political hashtags, the research draws on platform governance theory and emotional resonance metrics to assess engagement patterns, influencer behavior, and algorithmic amplification. Findings reveal that TikTok's short-form, emotionally resonant videos allow both official campaigns and grassroots creators to bypass traditional media gatekeeping. In Indonesia, meme-driven user content often achieved engagement rates above 60%, surpassing official campaign videos and highlighting humor and satire as dominant forms. In Malaysia, politicians such as Syed Saddiq gained more than 500,000 new followers during the 2022 campaign by employing authentic, relatable storytelling to connect with voters. In the Philippines, coordinated influencer networks generated millions of views for revisionist historical narratives, demonstrating the risks of emotionally charged disinformation. Comparative analysis shows how TikTok operates differently across Southeast Asia's sociopolitical contexts: Indonesia illustrates the power of grassroots humor, Malaysia underscores the effectiveness of storytelling in political outreach, and the Philippines exposes vulnerabilities to disinformation through influencer coordination. Overall, the study underscores a paradox. TikTok democratizes political expression by lowering barriers for participation but simultaneously magnifies post-truth dynamics and risks marginalizing dissenting voices through algorithmic bias. To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening algorithmic transparency and implementing targeted digital literacy programs for youth voters in Southeast Asia. These measures are vital to safeguarding democratic integrity within rapidly evolving digital spaces.

Keywords: Tiktok, Political Communication, Southeast Asia, Elections, Disinformation, Algorithmic Bias, Post Truth Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2020, TikTok has experienced substantial and sustained growth among Southeast Asia's 18–35 demographic. This demographic expansion aligns with a broader regional trend of increasing

internet penetration and mobile first engagement, particularly accelerated during the COVID 19 pandemic. As public life migrated online during lockdowns, digital platforms became vital conduits for information, entertainment, and community. Among these, TikTok distinguished itself by offering short form, engaging video content tailored to the fast paced preferences of younger users (Zhu et al., 2020). The platform's appeal lies not only in its ease of use and rapid content consumption model but also in its algorithmic ability to cater content directly to user interests. In countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, TikTok saw dramatic increases in downloads and daily active users, establishing itself as a dominant platform in Southeast Asia's social media hierarchy (Sewall, 2021).

This study addresses that gap by analyzing TikTok's role in electoral campaigns in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Specifically, it investigates how political actors, influencers, and ordinary users employ TikTok to construct and amplify campaign narratives, and how the platform's algorithm mediates these processes. By focusing on cross-national cases, the study highlights both opportunities for democratic participation and risks of disinformation unique to the Southeast Asian context (Eagleton, 2020). While scholars recognize TikTok's capacity for grassroots mobilization and civic discourse (Husam & Almothafar, 2022), few studies have systematically compared its electoral impact across multiple Southeast Asian countries. This article therefore contributes by offering the first comparative, cross-national analysis of TikTok in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, showing how the platform both democratizes participation and exacerbates post-truth dynamics (Eagleton, 2020).

This increasing politicization of TikTok has, however, sparked concern within the scholarly discourse on post truth politics. This term describes a sociopolitical climate in which emotional resonance and personal belief overshadow objective facts and empirical validation. Digital media platforms particularly those like TikTok that reward virality are seen as fertile grounds for the proliferation of such dynamics. Viral content often spreads not because it is true but because it is sensational, relatable, or emotionally charged (Albar & Ratnasari, 2022). The architecture of TikTok, with its algorithmically curated "For You" page, inherently amplifies content that evokes strong reactions, regardless of its factual accuracy. Studies suggest that this model fosters echo chambers, reinforces existing biases, and diminishes critical engagement with information (Wen-yan et al., 2023). These features are especially consequential for young voters who may lack the media literacy skills necessary to navigate a saturated and often misleading digital information landscape.

The algorithmic nature of content curation on TikTok has generated academic interest, particularly regarding its influence on political cognition and behavior. Research indicates that the app's personalization algorithms significantly shape what users see, think, and believe about politics. Users are more likely to engage with content that confirms their existing views, resulting in content feedback loops that intensify ideological silos. For youth engaging in elections for the first time, such exposure patterns may frame their political consciousness in ways that are emotionally compelling but informationally impoverished (Surendra et al., 2021; Zhan et al., 2022). This phenomenon marks a critical departure from earlier models of political socialization, which traditionally relied on interpersonal communication, mainstream news media, or civic institutions.

As a result, TikTok emerges not merely as a communication channel but as a central player in the production of political meaning.

Region specific research has begun to shed light on how Southeast Asian users utilize TikTok for political expression. These studies reveal diverse modes of engagement shaped by local political contexts, cultural practices, and historical legacies. In Indonesia, for example, TikTok has been harnessed by youth movements to promote voter education and satirize political elites. In the Philippines, the platform has facilitated the dissemination of populist narratives and revisionist histories, often in favor of authoritarian leaning figures. Malaysia, meanwhile, has seen younger politicians strategically using TikTok to bypass legacy media and speak directly to voters (Eagleton, 2020). These varied uses demonstrate the adaptability of TikTok's affordances to different sociopolitical ecosystems, highlighting both the democratizing potential and the vulnerabilities of the platform.

Governments across Southeast Asia have responded differently to TikTok's growing political role. Some have embraced the platform as a tool for state sponsored communication, leveraging its reach to publicize policies or reinforce national identity. Others have reacted with suspicion, instituting content monitoring mechanisms or proposing regulations targeting politically sensitive material (Sewall, 2021). These divergent responses reflect deeper tensions between digital openness and political control, between participatory citizenship and state sovereignty. TikTok thus becomes a contested space where freedom of expression, platform governance, and state authority intersect.

METHOD

This study adopted a narrative review approach to explore the influence of social media on mass communication practices within the broader context of digital transformation. The methodology followed a structured yet flexible protocol designed to identify, analyze, and synthesize peer-reviewed literature from reputable academic databases. The aim was to ensure that the review captured diverse perspectives and rigorous empirical findings, while also accommodating studies employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research designs.

The literature search was conducted using three major academic databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, and PubMed. These platforms were selected for their extensive coverage of interdisciplinary fields, including communication studies, media technology, public health, sociology, and information systems. The search process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of refinement to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant articles. Advanced search tools offered by these databases, such as Boolean operators and date filters, were utilized to enhance the precision and scope of the results.

To guide the literature retrieval process, a carefully curated set of keywords was developed to reflect the central themes of the study. For the domain of social media, keywords included "Social Media," "Digital Communication," and "Social Networking Sites." To capture dimensions related to mass communication, search terms such as "Mass Communication," "Public Communication," and "Media Studies" were employed. Additionally, the digital transformation of communication practices was investigated using keywords such as "Digital Transformation," "Digital Media," and

"Technology and Communication." Combinations of these keywords using Boolean operators (e.g., "Social Media AND Mass Communication," "Digital Transformation AND Communication," "Mass Media AND Social Networks") helped in targeting articles that lie at the intersection of these thematic areas. Each database search was limited to title, abstract, and keywords to ensure thematic relevance.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully defined to refine the selection of articles and maintain a high standard of academic integrity. Articles were included if they met several essential criteria. First, the thematic relevance was critical; selected studies had to explicitly address social media, mass communication, or digital transformation as a central research focus. Second, only peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, or empirical research reports were considered to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the findings. Third, to preserve temporal relevance, only articles published in the past ten years were included, allowing the review to reflect current developments in the digital communication landscape. Fourth, methodological transparency was a requirement; studies were selected based on the clarity of their research design, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods, and the availability of empirical data. Finally, the review prioritized studies that covered diverse geographical and demographic contexts, providing a more holistic understanding of global trends and localized experiences in media usage.

Conversely, exclusion criteria were also established to avoid the inclusion of low-quality or non-academic material. Non-scholarly publications such as blog posts, opinion pieces, magazine articles, and editorials without methodological foundations were excluded. Additionally, articles that lacked a clear description of their methodology or failed to present empirical evidence were omitted. Studies published more than ten years ago were also excluded, as they were deemed potentially outdated in relation to the rapid evolution of digital media technologies and usage patterns. Finally, articles with insufficient analytical rigor, such as those lacking robust data analysis or presenting vague or anecdotal results, were not included in the final synthesis.

Once the preliminary list of potentially relevant articles was compiled from the three databases, a multi-step selection process was implemented. In the first stage, duplicate articles retrieved from multiple sources were removed. The remaining studies were then screened by evaluating their titles and abstracts. This step helped eliminate articles that were tangentially related to the core topics or lacked methodological detail. Full texts of shortlisted articles were obtained and thoroughly reviewed to assess compliance with the inclusion criteria. Particular attention was given to the methodological clarity, relevance of the research questions, and the context of the study.

The types of studies included in the final review encompassed a broad spectrum of research designs, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. This included randomized controlled trials evaluating the effectiveness of social media campaigns in public communication, cohort studies examining longitudinal patterns in media consumption, cross-sectional surveys investigating public opinion formation through digital platforms, and qualitative case studies exploring specific media phenomena. Mixed-methods research combining statistical analysis with ethnographic observations or discourse analysis was also included to provide a richer understanding of complex social This study employs a qualitative content analysis (QCA) to examine TikTok's role in shaping political discourse during electoral campaigns in Indonesia (2024), Malaysia (2022), and the Philippines (2022). The analysis focused on how TikTok's

audiovisual features and algorithmic mechanisms influence the spread and reception of political narratives. A mixed approach was applied: qualitative coding of video content and limited quantitative tracking of engagement metrics (views, shares, comments, and follower growth).

The QCA approach adopted in this study adheres to best practices in social media research. As Chan et al. (2023) recommend, videos were sampled using election-related hashtags, engagement metrics, and campaign period timelines. Coding categories included tone (humor, serious, informative), emotional appeal, narrative framing, and affiliation (official vs. non-official actors). These procedures enabled systematic comparison across countries, while quantitative engagement measures (e.g., virality scores, follower growth) were used to complement thematic coding.

To enhance transparency and reproducibility, all analytical procedures were documented in detail. Software tools for qualitative analysis were used to facilitate data management and thematic comparison (Horne, 2023). The analysis was conducted reflexively, with researchers acknowledging their positionality and the interpretive nature of qualitative work. This reflexivity is especially important in digital ethnography where researcher bias can influence theme identification (Chan et al., 2023).

Theoretical insights from platform governance literature informed the analytical lens. Frameworks such as "regulatory governance" and the "polity of platforms" were used to understand how TikTok's technological architecture and content moderation policies shape user behavior and political expression (Makhortykh et al., 2022). Governance dynamics were analyzed not only in terms of content removal or amplification but also in how platform norms evolved in response to political sensitivities, societal expectations, and user interactions (Luo et al., 2023). These frameworks recognize the dual role of platforms as both enablers of speech and regulators of community standards (Addo, 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

To assess emotional resonance and virality two critical features in TikTok's political ecosystem the study drew on emerging quantitative and computational methods. Engagement metrics such as views, shares, and speed of interaction were used to determine virality (Papaevangelou, 2021). Sentiment analysis techniques, both automated and manual, helped evaluate the emotional tone of selected content (Fu et al., 2022; Katzenbach & Pohlmann, 2020). These emotional profiles were linked to engagement outcomes, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how specific emotional appeals influenced viewer interaction. Demographic inferences based on visible user interactions (e.g., comments, likes from youth centric accounts) further contextualized content resonance (Liu & Yang, 2022).

This study integrates digital media, political science, and sociology perspectives to interpret results (Henry & Witt, 2021). Methodological limitations include potential sampling bias (hashtags may not capture all political content) and interpretive bias in qualitative coding. Ethical safeguards were applied by using only publicly available content and following TikTok's terms of service to protect user privacy.

By applying this robust methodological framework, the study offers a detailed and context sensitive examination of TikTok's function in electoral communication. The methodological choices reflect the evolving nature of digital political analysis and the importance of adapting traditional research

paradigms to the complexities of platform governance and algorithmic mediation in contemporary social media ecosystems.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Indonesia: 2024 General Election

TikTok played a central role in shaping political discourse during Indonesia's 2024 elections. Hashtags like #Pemilu2024 and #Prabowo dominated engagement metrics, achieving millions of views and signaling heightened polarization in the digital public sphere (Cervi et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023). These hashtags encapsulated political narratives through emotionally compelling content, with humor and satire acting as key instruments to foster engagement. Users appropriated popular formats to reflect critiques of candidates or celebrate preferred political figures, broadening participation through culturally resonant tropes. Other trending hashtags like #AyoMemilih and #DebatCapres2024 encouraged civic participation, helping position TikTok as an informal public forum.

Quantitative comparisons between official and unofficial content revealed that while professionally produced videos by political parties or candidates attracted wide reach, it was user generated content often comedic or meme based that secured higher engagement rates (Cervi et al., 2021). Official videos adhered to campaign aesthetics, often focusing on policy themes and formal messaging. In contrast, unofficial content thrived on spontaneity and humor. Videos mocking political advertisements or using viral audio tracks often eclipsed formal posts in both visibility and engagement. This suggests that audiences on TikTok favor relatability and entertainment over structured, top down communication, particularly when engaging with political subjects.

Humor emerged as a dominant modality in political content, particularly among younger audiences. Drawing from Tian et al. (2022), satire and parody became mechanisms for critique, using comedic storytelling to highlight inconsistencies or controversies in campaign messaging. These videos often portrayed political missteps in a humorous light, increasing their shareability and recontextualizing serious discourse into digestible and viral formats. In some cases, users created mashups of speeches with trending music or visual effects, emphasizing the absurdity or irony of political statements. This trend exemplifies a new form of participatory critique in the digital age.

Influencers and micro creators played a pivotal role in framing political narratives. Through strategic collaborations with political figures or organic content creation, these users amplified campaign messages to highly targeted audiences. Their ability to adapt political messaging into culturally and emotionally resonant formats allowed them to outperform traditional media in shaping discourse and mobilizing youth participation. Influencers who previously focused on lifestyle or comedy shifted their content to support candidates, sometimes blurring the lines between genuine advocacy and sponsored content. The presence of regional micro creators also ensured localized engagement, making political narratives more accessible to diverse audiences across Indonesia's archipelago.

Malaysia: 2022 General Election

Malaysian politicians utilized TikTok's visual and participatory features to increase engagement during GE15. Content strategies included personal storytelling, interactive formats, and the use of viral sounds and trends (Chen, 2023). These techniques humanized candidates and aligned their messages with TikTok's informal communication culture. Politicians like Syed Saddiq employed casual clothing, behind the scenes videos, and direct Q&A formats to reduce the perceived distance between them and young voters. Other politicians experimented with duet videos and platform native humor to express policy points more engagingly.

Engagement spiked during campaign milestones such as televised debates, with TikTok clips circulating highlights that garnered 1–3 million views within 24 hours. Offline events and online attention economies thus reinforced each other in real time. Politicians who responded in real time or integrated user feedback into their content saw more sustained follower increases. The use of hashtag campaigns such as #GE15Youth or #Undi18 allowed targeted outreach to young voters, encouraging participation and identity formation through digital affiliation.

Effective political TikToks in Malaysia featured strong narrative structures and visual flair. Poucke (2023) notes that techniques like duets and transitions enhanced message delivery, while humor softened complex topics. Content that combined entertainment with educational value consistently drove interaction and comment based dialogue, particularly among younger viewers. Politicians who shared personal stories or behind the scenes campaign content cultivated a sense of authenticity, often leading to more constructive comment threads and cross platform engagement. Informal content strategies thus reinforced a sense of co ownership over political discourse.

Youth responses to TikTok content were overwhelmingly positive. Voters appreciated the platform's accessibility and the candidness of political figures willing to adapt to new digital norms. Engagement was highest for content that included calls to action, suggesting that interactivity significantly boosts political interest and potential mobilization among digital native constituents. Additionally, many users began creating their own political content, remixing candidate videos or offering grassroots commentary on political developments, further demonstrating the participatory dynamics catalyzed by TikTok.

Philippines: Marcos Jr. Campaign and Disinformation

TikTok was central to disinformation efforts during the Philippine presidential campaign. Videos promoting historical revisionism reshaped perceptions of the Marcos regime, downplaying authoritarian abuses while emphasizing nostalgic interpretations of governance (Primig et al., 2023). Emotional content, paired with stylized visuals and positive framing, effectively engaged users and reshaped memory. Many of these videos used dramatic music, soft focus visuals, and selective archival footage to paint a romanticized picture of the Marcos era. This approach subtly replaced historical critique with sentimental storytelling.

Meme aesthetics underpinned many of these narratives. Drawing from recognizable tropes and humor, creators produced content that was emotionally appealing and ideologically charged. This

approach allowed for rapid dissemination, especially among youth audiences, by embedding complex political messages within culturally resonant formats (Primig et al., 2023). TikToks depicting critics as humorless or outdated also circulated widely, helping to delegitimize dissenting voices while reinforcing in group cohesion through humor.

Hashtags such as #MarcosIsBack and #NeverForget operated as digital signposts for ideological content, shaping discussions through repetition and visibility. These tags fostered community formation around shared values, while also manipulating historical interpretation in favor of political agendas. Engagement with these hashtags also extended to user generated content like reaction videos and duet chains, contributing to their sustained visibility over time. This hashtag culture created a feedback loop, reinforcing the popularity and legitimacy of curated narratives.

Bot networks amplified disinformation by coordinating identical posts across dozens of accounts within minutes, while pro-Marcos influencers boosted visibility with millions of combined followers. This blurred the line between organic and orchestrated content. By combining algorithmic manipulation with authentic seeming advocacy, this strategy effectively blurred the boundaries between genuine and orchestrated political expression. Analysis of engagement patterns suggests coordinated posting behavior, with identical or near identical content appearing across multiple accounts within minutes. Influencers aligned with these campaigns frequently repurposed narratives across platforms, extending their reach and complicating content moderation efforts.

These dynamics underscore how TikTok's algorithm, aesthetic culture, and influencer economy converge to shape electoral communication not merely as a neutral platform but as a structured digital environment where narratives are curated, circulated, and contested.

The transformative power of digital platforms has dramatically reshaped the mechanics, aesthetics, and logic of political communication, especially within the context of Southeast Asia's rapidly evolving media ecosystems. Among these platforms, TikTok stands out as a uniquely disruptive and innovative force, altering not only how political messages are constructed and disseminated but also who gets to participate in political discourse. The platform's characteristic affordances short form video content, integrated music and effects, participatory features like duets and stitches, and its inherent reliance on trending aesthetics constitute a communicative grammar that is vastly different from older platforms such as Facebook and YouTube (Chan et al., 2023). Whereas Facebook supports long form textual debates and facilitates group based interaction, and YouTube excels in detailed, documentary style video storytelling, TikTok compresses complex political narratives into easily consumable, emotionally engaging clips (Barrett & Kreiss, 2019).

This structural difference necessitates a paradigm shift in political strategy. Politicians on TikTok must engage audiences through lighthearted tones, humor, personal storytelling, and performative authenticity. Traditional campaign rhetoric rigid, hierarchical, and policy heavy often fails to gain traction in a medium optimized for viral entertainment. Consequently, a new aesthetic of political communication has emerged, one that blurs boundaries between seriousness and spectacle, and between political content and meme culture. This evolution has given rise to hybrid roles such as the "influencer politician" or the "political creator," whereby figures blend entertainment with

ideological messaging, reaching audiences previously disengaged from conventional political discourse.

TikTok's algorithm systematically privileges viral and emotionally charged content, often at the expense of accuracy and diversity (Gorwa et al., 2020). This creates an uneven information environment where dissenting or nuanced voices are marginalized. The lack of transparency in recommendation and moderation systems compounds the problem, making TikTok not just a communication channel but a powerful gatekeeper of political discourse.

The opacity of TikTok's moderation and recommendation policies further exacerbates this bias. Scholars have criticized the lack of transparency in how political content is curated, flagged, suppressed, or promoted (Chan et al., 2023). Especially in multi ethnic and politically diverse societies like those in Southeast Asia, such algorithmic bias can reinforce existing inequalities by disproportionately silencing marginalized communities or dissenting voices. Furthermore, TikTok's inadequate labeling of sponsored political content and lack of accessible data for third party monitoring hampers efforts to hold platforms accountable. Without clear standards for political transparency or robust auditing mechanisms, the platform risks becoming a conduit for covert influence campaigns and electoral manipulation.

These structural limitations intersect with the rise of post truth politics, a phenomenon marked by the prioritization of emotional appeal and personal belief over empirical fact. In contexts where traditional media institutions are weakened or distrusted, TikTok has become a primary source of political information, blurring the boundary between truth and affect (Gorwa, 2019). The Philippines offers a stark example, where historical revisionism around the Marcos dictatorship has been popularized through highly stylized and emotionally evocative TikTok content. These narratives, often framed through nostalgia and national pride, obscure documented abuses and foster new political myths. The result is not just disinformation, but a reengineering of collective memory and identity a phenomenon that has long term implications for historical accountability and democratic health.

This post truth dynamic undermines informed citizenship. As emotionally charged content increasingly displaces fact based analysis, the public's capacity for critical deliberation is weakened. The erosion of epistemic standards what counts as valid knowledge in public discourse leads to a civic environment governed by sentiment rather than substance. This shift makes it easier for political actors to manipulate narratives and harder for citizens to detect propaganda, especially in digital environments that lack strong fact checking ecosystems. To counter this, scholars have emphasized the need for digital literacy education that not only teaches technical skills but also fosters critical media consumption, civic reasoning, and resistance to manipulation (Leandro, 2023).

Importantly, the effects of TikTok on political engagement vary significantly across Southeast Asia, driven by cultural, institutional, and historical factors. In Indonesia, humor and irony serve as key mechanisms for political expression, drawing from a cultural tradition that values indirect critique and satire. This aligns well with TikTok's meme centric culture, enabling youth to engage politically without overt confrontation. In contrast, Malaysia's multicultural political landscape favors storytelling that appeals across ethnic lines, often invoking unity, resilience, or reform (Poucke,

2023). These narratives find traction on TikTok through personal anecdotes, cultural symbols, and emotionally resonant appeals.

Meanwhile, regional differences in internet governance and censorship regimes also shape political content. In more authoritarian contexts, direct criticism of state actors may be punished or removed, prompting users to adopt subversive tactics such as allegory, coded language, or humor as resistance (Wa & Zhang, 2023). The flexibility of TikTok's visual and audio affordances allows for these forms of indirect dissent to thrive. However, these same features can also be exploited for the opposite effect: to glamorize authoritarianism or spread nationalist propaganda. Thus, the political valence of TikTok content is highly contingent on the sociopolitical context in which it is produced and circulated.

Moving forward, coordinated interventions are essential. Regulators should mandate greater algorithmic transparency and clear labeling of political content. Educators should integrate digital literacy programs that train youth to critically assess viral content. Platforms should assume responsibility for moderating disinformation while supporting civic-oriented creators. Only through such measures can Southeast Asian democracies harness TikTok's participatory potential without succumbing to its post-truth risks.

Ultimately, TikTok exemplifies a broader shift in the media landscape where the infrastructures of communication are no longer neutral conduits but active agents shaping what is seen, said, and remembered. As Southeast Asian democracies confront the twin pressures of digital transformation and political polarization, the stakes of getting this balance right could not be higher. Research, policy, and civic action must coalesce to ensure that the promise of digital engagement is not eclipsed by its peril.

CONCLUSION

TikTok has become a central actor in political communication across Southeast Asia, democratizing participation while simultaneously amplifying post-truth risks. This study showed that in Indonesia, TikTok reinforced humor- and satire driven political expression; in Malaysia, it facilitated authentic storytelling that resonated with young voters; and in the Philippines, it served as a key channel for coordinated disinformation. These findings underline that TikTok is not merely an entertainment platform but a political arena that actively shapes public opinion and influences electoral integrity.

Based on these insights, three strategic measures are urgently needed. First, policymakers should mandate algorithmic transparency and establish clear regulations for political content. Second, digital literacy programs must be prioritized, particularly for young voters, to strengthen their ability to recognize disinformation and critically evaluate viral content. Third, platform companies must take responsibility by labeling sponsored political posts, reducing the amplification of false narratives, and supporting pro-democratic creators. Future research should include longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of TikTok on voter behavior and comparative policy analyses across countries. Given the rapid digital transformation in the region, balancing TikTok's

participatory potential with safeguards against manipulation is an urgent task for the survival of Southeast Asian democracies.

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