

THE ROLE OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN BUILDING A DIGITAL-BASED CIVIL SOCIETY

Rizquna Salma Labibah¹, Ikhwan Imam Saputra²

E-mail correspondence: rizkunasalma@gmail.com

^{1,2}Islamic Religious Education Management Study Program, Universitas Darul Ulum Islamic Centre Sudirman,
Semarang Regency

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and evaluate the structural and cultural challenges faced by youth in building a digitally based civil society. The research employs a qualitative socio-legal approach with multiple case studies involving youth communities engaged in social advocacy, digital literacy initiatives, and intergroup dialogue through online platforms. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and analysis of recent policy documents and reports. The findings reveal that youth play significant roles as digital literacy advocates, facilitators of inclusive dialogue, mobilizers of online social action, and producers of narratives promoting pluralism and civic values. However, their effectiveness is constrained by structural challenges, including unequal internet access, limited critical digital literacy, sustainability of community funding, and evolving digital regulations. Cultural challenges such as identity polarization, sensational media culture, and intergenerational value gaps also affect the quality of public deliberation. The study concludes that building a digital civil society requires strengthened digital literacy, inclusive policy support, and cross-sector collaboration to ensure an ethical, participatory, and sustainable digital public sphere.

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran serta mengevaluasi tantangan struktural dan kultural yang dihadapi generasi muda dalam membangun masyarakat madani berbasis digital. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain socio-legal dan studi kasus multipel pada komunitas pemuda yang aktif dalam advokasi sosial, literasi digital, dan dialog lintas identitas melalui platform daring. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi digital, serta analisis dokumen kebijakan dan laporan terbaru. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa generasi muda berperan sebagai agen literasi digital, fasilitator dialog inklusif, mobilisator aksi sosial daring, serta produsen narasi kebangsaan dan pluralisme.

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Kata kunci:

Generasi Muda; Masyarakat
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Literasi Digital; Partisipasi Publik

Namun, efektivitas peran tersebut menghadapi tantangan struktural berupa ketimpangan akses internet, keterbatasan literasi kritis, keberlanjutan pendanaan komunitas, serta dinamika regulasi ruang digital. Tantangan kultural seperti polarisasi identitas, budaya sensasional di media sosial, dan kesenjangan nilai antar generasi juga memengaruhi kualitas deliberasi publik. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembangunan masyarakat madani digital memerlukan penguatan literasi, dukungan kebijakan inklusif, serta kolaborasi lintas sektor untuk memastikan ruang publik digital yang etis, partisipatif, dan berkelanjutan.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation in the past decade has changed the way people interact, organize, and participate in public life. The younger generation is the group most affected and the most adaptive to this change. In Indonesia, the internet penetration rate has exceeded 78% of the population and is dominated by the age group of 15–29 years, which shows the highest level of digital connectivity compared to other age groups (APJII, 2024; BPS, 2024). Social media, collaborative platforms, and online discussion spaces have become a new arena for the socio-political participation of the younger generation. In this context, the digital space is no longer just a medium of communication, but an arena for the formation of public opinion, social mobilization, and civic expression.

The concept of civil society refers to a social order characterized by active participation of citizens, respect for plurality, the rule of law, and the strengthening of public ethics. In the framework of civil society, citizens are not just policy objects, but subjects who play an active role in social and political processes. In the digital era, the participatory dimension has expanded through online engagement, such as social campaigns, policy advocacy, solidarity gathering, and public knowledge production. The UNDP report (2024) emphasizes that digital transformation opens up wider opportunities for civic participation, especially for youth who have strong digital literacy capacity and social networks.

However, these opportunities are inseparable from challenges. The digital space is also an arena for identity polarization, the spread of disinformation, and the practice of hate speech that can disrupt social cohesion. The national digital literacy survey shows that although internet access is increasing, the level of critical ability to verify information still varies between regions and social groups (Ministry of Communication and Informatics, 2023). This shows that the role of the younger generation in building a digital-based civil society is highly dependent on the capacity of media literacy and digital ethics possessed. Without this foundation, the digital space has the potential to weaken the quality of public deliberation and strengthen social fragmentation.

On the other hand, various youth initiatives show significant potential in strengthening civil society values. Anti-hoax campaign movements, strengthening digital literacy, social media-based environmental advocacy, and interfaith discussion forums facilitated through online platforms are concrete examples of the contribution of the younger generation. UNICEF Indonesia (2023) noted that youth involvement in digital advocacy and community leadership programs has increased in the last five years, especially on issues of climate change, gender equality, and social inclusion. This participation shows that the young generation is not only consumers of digital information, but also producers of social narratives oriented towards the values of public civilization.

Theoretically, the role of the young generation in building a digital-based civil society can be understood through the concept of deliberative public space and social capital. Digital platforms expand access to public discourse, enabling more inclusive and decentralized

participation. However, the quality of deliberation is largely determined by communication norms, platform algorithms, and individual capacity to manage dissent. Recent studies show that strengthening digital community-based social networks contributes to increased social trust and collective solidarity, which are important elements of civil society (OECD, 2022). Thus, digital transformation provides a new space for the younger generation to build social cohesion, while demanding ethical responsibility in the use of technology.

In the context of Indonesia as a multicultural society, the role of the digital-based young generation is becoming increasingly relevant. Religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity requires an inclusive and dialogical interaction space. Digital media provides a channel that allows cross-identity encounters without geographical boundaries. However, without adequate moderation of values and literacy, the space is also vulnerable to symbolic conflict. Therefore, it is important to examine how young generations use digital technology as an instrument for the formation of civil society, the factors that support and hinder this role, and strategies that can be developed to strengthen the contribution of youth in building an inclusive and civilized social order.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the form of digital participation of the younger generation in building civil society, evaluate the structural and cultural challenges faced, and formulate policy recommendations and sustainable empowerment strategies. With an analytical approach based on data and the latest literature, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of civil society concepts in the digital era as well as a practical contribution to strengthening the role of the younger generation in public life.

METHODS

1. Types of Research

This study uses a qualitative approach with socio-legal design and multiple case studies to analyze the role of the young generation in building a digital-based civil society. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth exploration of digital participation practices, the subjective experiences of young actors, and the dynamics of interaction in digital public spaces. The socio-legal approach is used to examine the relationship between the digital citizenship practices of the younger generation and the regulatory framework that governs the digital space, such as digital literacy policies, personal data protection, and content moderation. Thus, this study integrates normative and empirical analysis simultaneously.

2. Research Location and Time

The research was conducted on digital-based youth communities and initiatives in three regions representing urban and semi-urban contexts, with relatively high levels of internet penetration and active digital community activities. The selection of locations is carried out purposively based on the following criteria: (1) the existence of youth movements or communities that are active in digital-based social advocacy; (2) socio-cultural diversity that allows cross-identity interaction; and (3) openness of access to data and informants. The research was carried out over a six-month period, including data collection, digital observation, and thematic analysis.

3. Subject and Technique of Determining Informants

The research subjects are young people aged 16–30 years who are active in digital activities oriented towards social, educational, national, environmental, or tolerance issues. The technique of determining informants uses purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Key informants include: (1) digital community movers; (2) social advocacy content creators; (3) active participants in online discussion forums; and (4)

representatives of institutions that run digital literacy programs. The number of informants is adjusted to the principle of data saturation, which is when the information obtained has shown a consistent pattern and does not produce new categories.

4. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is carried out through:

- a) Semi-structured interviews, to explore motivations, digital participation strategies, challenges faced, and informants' perceptions of civil society.
- b) Digital ethnography, which is the observation of social media activities, online forums, webinars, digital campaigns, and community interactions on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X.
- c) The documentation study is in the form of an analysis of community activity reports, government policies on digital literacy, and statistical data related to internet use and youth participation.

5. Research Instruments

The main instrument of the research is the researcher himself (*human instrument*), with the help of interview guidelines and digital observation sheets. The interview guidelines include several key indicators:

- a) The form of digital participation carried out;
- b) Goals and values that are sought;
- c) Audience and network building strategies;
- d) Ethical and regulatory challenges;
- e) Social impact of digital activities.

Digital observation sheets are used to record communication patterns, levels of engagement, narratives used, and audience responses to the content produced.

6. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis through the following stages: data reduction, categorization, theme identification, interpretation, and conclusion drawn. The framework of analysis is based on the theory of digital civic engagement, the theory of deliberative public space, and the concept of social capital. Digital civic engagement is used to analyze the form of active participation of youth in public issues through online platforms. Deliberative public space theory helps to understand the quality of digital discourse and the extent to which those interactions reflect the values of civil society. Meanwhile, the concept of social capital is used to assess the extent to which the digital network of the younger generation is able to build trust and social solidarity.

7. Data Validity and Validity

The validity of the data is maintained through the triangulation technique of sources and methods, namely comparing the results of interviews with digital observations and written documents. In addition, *member checking* was carried out with several informants to ensure the suitability of the researcher's interpretation of the data obtained. The trail audit process is also carried out by systematically documenting all stages of research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of the Young Generation in Building a Digital-Based Civil Society

a. Overview of Young Generation's Digital Participation

Based on the results of interviews, digital observations, and analysis of community documentation, it was found that the younger generation is the group with the most intensive level of digital engagement. Recent data shows that national internet penetration has surpassed 78% of the population, with the 15–29 age group being the most active and dominant users in the production and distribution of digital content. Social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X are the main spaces for the expression and mobilization of social ideas.

In this context, the younger generation does not only play a role as consumers of information, but also as digital citizens who actively build public discourse. Observations of three youth communities show that they routinely produce educational content on tolerance, media literacy, environmental issues, gender equality, and political participation. This activity reflects the practice of digital citizenship which is the foundation of technology-based civil society.

b. Forms of Role of the Young Generation

Based on thematic analysis, five main forms of the role of the young generation in building a digital-based civil society were found:

1) Digital Literacy and Anti-Disinformation Agents

The young generation is active in anti-hoax campaigns and media literacy education. Interviews show that many initiatives were born out of concerns about the rampant disinformation that fuels social polarization. Programs such as digital literacy online classes, fact clarification content, and interactive discussions are instruments for building a more rational and deliberative public space.

Data from the latest national digital literacy survey shows that although Indonesia's digital literacy index is in the "way to good" category, there are still weaknesses in the aspects of digital security and media ethics. This shows that the contribution of the younger generation in digital literacy has strategic relevance in strengthening the quality of public discourse.

2) Cross-Identity Dialogue Facilitator

The findings of the study show that young people are leveraging digital platforms to host cross-faith and cultural discussions through webinars, podcasts, and online forums. These interactions create a virtual public space that is more inclusive and has no geographical boundaries.

Observations show that participation in such forums improves cross-identity understanding and reduces stereotypes. This model of dialogue expands the concept of deliberative public space, where social discourse is no longer limited to physical space.

3) Digital Social Action Mobilizer

The younger generation also plays a role as a mobilizer of digital-based collective action. Environmental campaigns, social fundraising, and public policy advocacy are carried out through online platforms with a high level of participation.

In one case study, an Instagram-based social campaign managed to gather thousands of participants in a short period of time, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital networks in building social solidarity. This shows that social capital can now be built through strong digital connectivity.

4) Inclusive Narrative Producer

Content analysis shows that the younger generation is actively producing alternative narratives that promote diversity and national values. Creative content such as short videos, infographics, and visual campaigns have proven to be more effective in reaching young audiences than conventional formal approaches. This creativity-based communication strategy is an important instrument in shaping an inclusive digital culture.

5) Hybrid Community Movers (Online–Offline)

Another important finding is the integration between online and offline activities. The youth community does not stop at digital campaigns, but continues it in the form of direct social actions such as community discussions, training, and social activities. This hybrid approach amplifies social impact and bridges the digital space with social reality.

c. Challenges Faced by the Young Generation

Despite its great potential, the study found a number of significant challenges:

- 1) First, identity polarization and social media algorithms that tend to strengthen *echo chambers* limit cross-view interactions.
- 2) Second, inequality of internet access in certain regions hinders the equal participation of youth.
- 3) Third, regulatory pressures and platform policies related to content moderation can affect freedom of expression.
- 4) Fourth, digital *fatigue* and psychological pressure due to intense online interaction are also obstacles to the sustainability of participation.

Based on the theory of digital civic engagement, the participation of the younger generation in the digital space reflects a new form of network-based active citizenship. The digital space functions as an arena for the formation of public opinion that is more decentralized than the conventional model.

In the perspective of deliberative public space theory, digital platforms expand access to discourse, but the quality of deliberation is highly dependent on media literacy and communication norms. Meanwhile, from a social capital perspective, the digital network of the younger generation is able to build solidarity across identities quickly, although it is vulnerable to fragmentation if not managed with strong digital ethics.

Role Dimensions	Form of Implementation	Impact on Civil Society
Digital Literacy	Anti-hoax campaign	Improving public rationality
Cross-Identity Dialogue	Webinars & online forums	Reducing social stereotypes
Collective Action	Digital social campaigns	Strengthening solidarity
Inclusive Narrative	Creative content	Shaping a positive digital culture
Hybrid Community	Online-offline integration	Sustainable social impact

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

The results of this study show that the young generation has a strategic position in building a digital-based civil society through active participation practices, public discourse production, and solidarity mobilization. Digitalization has transformed the concept of civil society from a physical space-based space to a fluid and flexible network space.

However, the effectiveness of this role depends on strengthening digital literacy, inclusive policy support, and integration between online and offline activities. A digital-based civil society requires not only freedom of expression, but also ethical responsibility in public communication. Thus, the young generation is not only a complementary actor in digital social transformation, but the main motor that forms the new face of civil society in the technological era.

2. Evaluation of the Structural and Cultural Challenges of the Young Generation in Building a Digital-Based Civil Society

Based on the results of qualitative research with a socio-legal approach and multiple case studies, the evaluation of the role of the young generation in building a digital-based civil society shows that the great potential of this group is inseparable from various complex structural and cultural barriers. Thematic analysis from interviews, digital observations, and document studies revealed that the success of the younger generation in strengthening digital public spaces is largely determined by the quality of the digital ecosystem, policy support, literacy capacity, and the socio-cultural dynamics that surround it.

In general, the findings of the study show that structural challenges are related to the dimensions of policy, infrastructure, economy, and platform governance, while cultural challenges concern patterns of social interaction, communication norms, and identity construction in the digital space. These two dimensions are intertwined and form an environment of participation that affects the effectiveness of digital civil society development.

1) Structural Challenges

a) Inequality of Infrastructure and Digital Access

The latest data shows that Indonesia's internet penetration has reached more than 78% of the population (APJII, 2024). However, the aggregate figure hides the inequality of quality and equal access between regions. Field studies show that the young generation in urban areas has stable network access and adequate devices, while in rural areas or 3T areas (frontier, outermost, disadvantaged), the quality of connectivity is still a major obstacle.

This inequality has a direct impact on digital participation opportunities. Youth communities in areas with limited connections have difficulty organizing online forums, producing video content, or managing digital-based social campaigns. In the context of civil society, this inequality of access creates inequality of participation in digital public spaces, so that the representation of discourse tends to be dominated by certain groups.

In addition, the cost of internet access and digital devices is still an obstacle for some young generations from the lower economic group. UNDP (2024) emphasizes that inclusive digital transformation requires policy support that ensures affordability of access, not just network expansion.

b) Digital Literacy Gap and Critical Capacity

Although the younger generation is known as *digital natives*, this study found that technical skills are not always accompanied by critical capacity. Indonesia's Digital Literacy Index shows an improvement in national scores, but aspects of digital ethics and information security still need to be strengthened (Ministry of Communication and Informatics, 2023).

Interviews with informants show that some young people are active in disseminating social information, but do not always verify sources in depth. This phenomenon shows a paradox: the younger generation is an agent of information, but at the same time vulnerable to the flow of disinformation.

In the context of civil society, the quality of public deliberation is highly dependent on the integrity of information. If the digital space is filled with inaccurate information, then the value of rationality and accountability that is the foundation of civil society will be weakened. Therefore, digital literacy is not only about technical skills, but also ethical awareness and social responsibility.

c) Organizational Resilience and Funding Limitations

Case studies show that many digital youth communities are voluntary and volunteer-based. Activities such as literacy campaigns, webinars, or online advocacy often rely on short-term funding or member self-help.

These limitations have an impact on the sustainability of the program. Without stable financial support, it is difficult for communities to develop impact evaluation systems, capacity training, or network expansion. In fact, civil society development requires a long-term process to form a culture of social participation and solidarity.

Sustainable financing models, such as collaboration with the private sector or *social enterprise* development, are still not optimally utilized by the youth community. This shows the need to strengthen managerial capacity and social entrepreneurship among the younger generation.

d) Digital Regulation and Freedom of Expression

The evaluation also shows that the dynamics of digital regulation affect the movement space of the younger generation. Content moderation, data protection, and hate speech policies often fall under tension between public protection and freedom of expression.

The global civil space report notes that there are challenges to digital civil liberties in various countries, including in the form of administrative restrictions or pressure on online activism (CIVICUS, 2024). In the Indonesian context, some young activists expressed concern about the potential criminalization of certain expressions in the digital space. This condition shows that the development of a digital civil society requires a balance between regulations that protect society and guarantees freedom of public participation.

2) Cultural Challenges

a) Polarization and Fragmentation of Digital Public Space

The research findings show that the digital space tends to be fragmented by algorithms that reinforce user preferences. Identity polarization increases especially on political momentum or sensitive issues. The echo *chamber* phenomenon limits cross-view interaction and weakens deliberative dialogue. The younger generation that promotes the value of tolerance often faces verbal attacks or delegitimization from groups with different views.

From the perspective of civil society, public spaces should ideally be an arena for rational and inclusive exchange of ideas. But in digital practice, emotion and sensationality often dominate discourse.

b) Sensational Culture and the Logic of Virality

The *attention economy* encourages the production of content that triggers strong emotions in order to get high interaction. Educational content often loses visibility compared to controversial content. This creates a dilemma for the younger generation: maintain the integrity of the message or follow the pattern of virality. This challenge has an impact on the quality of civil society narratives that should be based on rationality and public ethics.

c) Value Gap Between Generations

The research also found that there is a value tension between the younger generation and the older age group in understanding digital freedom of expression. Some communities still view social criticism or discussions of pluralism as a threat to the stability of traditional values. This gap shows that the development of a digital civil society requires a cross-generational approach so that the value of inclusivity does not stop at young communities alone.

Overall, the evaluation shows that structural and cultural challenges reinforce each other in shaping the complexity of digital public spaces. Inequality of access widens the participation gap, while low literacy and sensational culture worsen the quality of public deliberation.

However, the potential of the young generation remains significant. By strengthening digital literacy, inclusive policy support, and sustainable financing models, young people can optimize their role as agents of social transformation.

Digital-based civil society is not just about access to technology, but about how technology is used to strengthen solidarity, rationality, and responsible public participation. Therefore, the digital civil society development strategy must integrate structural reform and cultural change simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the young generation has a strategic role in building a digital-based civil society through active participation, inclusive narrative production, and strengthening literacy and social solidarity in online public spaces. However, the effectiveness of this role still faces structural challenges in the form of inequality of digital access, limitations of critical literacy, sustainability of funding, and the dynamics of cyberspace regulation. On the other hand, cultural challenges such as identity polarization, sensational culture, and the value gap between generations also affect the quality of public deliberation. Therefore, the development of a digital civil society requires strengthening the capacity of the younger generation, policy support that ensures an inclusive digital civic space, and a more ethical and dialogical communication culture transformation. The young generation has the potential to become the main motor of digital civil society, as long as it is supported by a fair, open, and sustainable ecosystem.

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