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Digital Influence and Ethical Civic Content Creation on Social Media Platforms in Malaysia and Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed how civic information is created, circulated, and consumed in Malaysia and Indonesia. As social media increasingly shapes public discourse, digital content creators play an influential role in informing civic participation while simultaneously raising concerns regarding misinformation, ethical responsibility, and public trust. This study examines how digital content creators navigate civic spaces within platform-driven communication ecosystems in Malaysia and Indonesia. Specifically, it identifies the mechanisms of digital influence employed by content creators, analyses the ethical challenges associated with civic content creation, and explores the implications of platform-driven communication for public trust and civic understanding. A qualitative research design was employed using document analysis and non-participant digital content observation. Civic-oriented content published on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X by selected Malaysian and Indonesian content creators was purposively sampled based on audience reach, engagement, and relevance to civic issues. The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to digital influence, ethical practices, and audience engagement. The findings reveal four major themes: strategic framing of civic narratives, algorithm-driven audience engagement, ethical tensions between influence and verification, and the negotiation of credibility within platform ecosystems. Content creators were found to balance audience engagement with factual accuracy while adapting their communication strategies to platform algorithms. However, algorithmic amplification and engagement-driven content frequently created tensions between speed, visibility, and ethical responsibility. The study recommends strengthening digital literacy, ethical content verification, and platform transparency to support responsible civic communication and enhance public trust in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Keywords: *Digital influence, civic content creation, platform power, social media communication, Malaysia and Indonesia.*

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital communication platforms has significantly transformed the contemporary civic information environment in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia. The emergence of platform-driven communication ecosystems has enabled digital content creators, influencers, and independent media actors to participate actively in shaping public discourse, civic awareness, and political engagement (Murthy & Madhok, 2020). Today's communication landscape is increasingly impacted by audience engagement metrics, algorithmic exposure, and quick material circulation across social networking platforms, in contrast to conventional media systems that mostly relied on institutional gatekeeping. As a result, civic narratives are no longer controlled solely by conventional news organisations but

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are also produced, reframed, and amplified by digital creators operating within highly competitive visibility economies (Gevorgyan, 2022).

In Malaysia and Indonesia, social media platforms have become central spaces for public discussion, civic participation, and the negotiation of social meaning. The mobile-first nature of digital communication cultures in both countries has accelerated the consumption of short-form, emotionally engaging, and visually driven content (Pandey & Chakravorty, 2025). Consequently, digital creators increasingly influence what audiences notice, interpret, and respond to in relation to civic and societal issues (Afandi et al., 2023). Creators can mobilize public attention, promote involvement, and influence views of legitimacy and responsibility using livestreaming techniques, audience engagement mechanisms, narrative production, and framing methods. However, the increasing reliance on engagement-based algorithms has also intensified concerns regarding misinformation, sensationalism, and the prioritisation of speed over verification in digital civic communication (Tambe & Hussein, 2023).

The growing influence of digital creators raises important ethical and communicative challenges within contemporary civic spaces (Latif et al., 2024). Although digital influence can strengthen democratic participation and public awareness, it may simultaneously contribute to information distortion, emotional manipulation, and declining public trust when civic-oriented content is produced without adequate verification or accountability (Hudson, 2025). Previous discussions about digital influence have frequently focused on visibility, reach, and virality; however, less focus has been placed on how creators manage conflicts between audience loyalty and factual accuracy, influence and responsibility, outrage-driven engagement, and significant civic understanding (Phuong & Ibrahim, 2025). These tensions are particularly significant in platform-driven environments where algorithms reward emotional reactions, rapid interaction, and continuous circulation of content (Yong, 2026). In such contexts, creators are required not only to attract audiences but also to balance ethical considerations in communicating civic issues responsibly (Patalauskaite, 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature on digital influence, social media communication, and civic participation, several important gaps remain. Existing studies have largely examined digital creators from perspectives such as audience engagement, platform visibility, influencer credibility, misinformation, or political participation. While these studies have significantly advanced understanding of digital communication, relatively little attention has been paid to how digital content creators negotiate ethical tensions while simultaneously functioning as civic communicators within platform-driven ecosystems. In particular, the interplay between platform algorithms, creator practices, ethical responsibility, and public trust remains insufficiently theorised, especially within comparative Southeast Asian contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Existing scholarship has also tended to examine these dimensions independently rather than as interconnected processes shaping contemporary civic communication.

To address these gaps, this study examines how digital content creators navigate civic spaces within the broader context of digital influence and platform power in Malaysia and Indonesia. Specifically, the study identifies the mechanisms of digital influence employed by creators, analyses the ethical tensions that emerge during civic content creation, and explores how platform-oriented communication practices influence public trust and civic understanding. Beyond providing empirical evidence from Malaysia and Indonesia, this study advances current scholarship by integrating digital influence theory, platform power, and ethical civic communication into a single analytical framework for examining creator-driven

civic communication. Rather than treating platform algorithms, creator practices, and civic responsibility as separate phenomena, the study conceptualises them as interconnected processes through which digital creators negotiate visibility, ethical responsibility, and public trust within algorithmically mediated environments.

The study further contributes theoretically by proposing that ethical negotiation functions as the mediating mechanism through which creators reconcile platform-driven visibility demands with civic responsibility, thereby extending existing theories of digital influence and platform power beyond predominantly technological explanations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Influence and the Transformation of Civic Communication

The transformation of civic communication through digital platforms has attracted growing scholarly attention over the past decade. While early studies primarily conceptualised digital platforms as technologies that expanded opportunities for participation and decentralised information production, more recent research argues that platform-based communication has fundamentally altered the nature of civic discourse itself. Rather than merely increasing access to information, digital platforms increasingly determine how public issues are framed, prioritised, and interpreted through algorithmic visibility and audience engagement mechanisms. This shift suggests that digital influence should no longer be understood simply as a function of popularity or technological accessibility, but as a dynamic interaction between creators, audiences, and platform infrastructures (Frey, 2024; Md Aminul & Fahima, 2025).

Although previous studies consistently acknowledge that platform algorithms shape information visibility, there remains disagreement regarding the extent to which creators retain agency within algorithmically mediated environments. Some scholars argue that creators strategically adapt their communication practices to satisfy algorithmic demands, whereas others contend that platform architectures increasingly constrain communicative choices by rewarding emotionally engaging and commercially valuable content. Consequently, existing literature has yet to fully explain how creators negotiate these structural pressures while maintaining ethical responsibility in civic communication.

Scholars have argued that digital influence is closely associated with the platformisation of communication, where algorithmic systems shape which content gains visibility and public attention (Walter & Friesike, 2025; Gandini et al., 2025). In platform-driven environments, engagement indicators such as likes, comments, shares, watch time, and virality function as signals that determine content circulation and prominence. Consequently, regardless of factual quality or civic worth, creators who successfully elicit emotional responses or audience participation are frequently rewarded with increased prominence. This transformation has shifted communication power from institutional media actors toward distributed creator-based ecosystems where influence is continuously negotiated through audience interaction and platform algorithms (Murthy et al., 2020).

Within civic contexts, digital influence plays an increasingly important role in shaping public awareness, political participation, social mobilisation, and collective understanding of societal issues. Content creators are now capable of functioning as alternative civic communicators who explain issues, interpret events, and frame public debates for online audiences (Phillips, 2024). In many cases, creators simplify complex social issues into accessible narratives that attract younger and mobile-first audiences who consume information primarily through social media platforms (Barman & Dakua, 2024). This

phenomena is especially noticeable in Southeast Asia, where smartphone usage and digital media penetration are still growing quickly. Nevertheless, while digital influence can strengthen public engagement and civic participation, it may also increase the risks of misinformation, emotional polarisation, and superficial understanding when content prioritises virality over verification (Tambe & Hussein, 2023).

Platform Power and Algorithmic Visibility

The concept of platform power has become increasingly central in discussions surrounding digital communication and civic discourse. Platform power refers to the ability of digital platforms to shape communication practices, information visibility, and audience behaviour through algorithmic systems, content moderation policies, and engagement-oriented infrastructures (Rustamova, 2025). Unlike traditional media institutions that exercise editorial control through human gatekeepers, digital platforms rely heavily on automated recommendation systems that determine which content is promoted, suppressed, or circulated within online environments (Liu, 2024).

Algorithms play a significant role in constructing visibility economies where creators compete for audience attention within highly saturated digital spaces. Research indicates that algorithmic systems often prioritise emotionally engaging, controversial, or highly interactive content because such materials increase user retention and platform activity (Zhang, 2025). As a result, instead of putting depth, contextual truth, or ethical responsibility first, creators could feel under pressure to generate material that suits algorithmic preferences. This condition contributes to what scholars describe as "attention economies," where public visibility becomes a valuable form of digital capital (Vettehen & Schaap, 2023).

Existing scholarship generally agrees that algorithmic recommendation systems have become central mechanisms of platform governance. Nevertheless, scholars differ in explaining whether platform power primarily reflects technological design or broader political-economic structures. Research within digital journalism, for example, argues that algorithmic visibility reshapes editorial priorities and public attention, whereas platform governance scholars emphasise the commercial logics embedded within recommendation systems. Despite these different perspectives, relatively little research has examined how platform power influences ethical decision-making among civic-oriented digital creators, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts.

The influence of platform power extends beyond content distribution and affects broader civic processes including political communication, public trust, and social participation. During moments of crisis or controversy, platform algorithms can accelerate the spread of information before verification processes occur, increasing the likelihood of misinformation and emotional amplification (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). Moreover, the rapidity of digital circulation often limits opportunities for reflective civic discussion, encouraging rapid reactions instead of informed deliberation. In this sense, platform power does not merely influence communication patterns but also shapes how civic reality is interpreted and experienced by digital audiences (Santana, 2025).

In Malaysia and Indonesia, the role of platform power is especially significant due to the widespread dependence on mobile-first communication ecosystems. Social media platforms serve not only as entertainment spaces but also as major sources of news, commentary, and public discussion (Cuenca & Perez, 2025). As creators navigate visibility competition within these environments, tensions emerge between maintaining audience engagement and sustaining ethical communication practices (Gallan et al., 2023). In order to

analyze modern digital influence, it is crucial to comprehend the connection between platform algorithms, creative behavior, and civic communication.

Civic Content Creation and Ethical Responsibility

The increasing participation of digital creators in civic communication has generated important discussions concerning ethics, accountability, and responsibility within online environments. Civic content creation refers to the production and dissemination of digital content related to public affairs, social issues, governance, community concerns, and collective societal interests (Irum et al., 2025). Civic-oriented communication, in contrast to entertainment-oriented information, has wider ramifications because it can affect political beliefs, public perception, and actual social behavior.

The existing literature generally recognises ethical responsibility as a fundamental component of civic communication. However, scholars conceptualise ethical responsibility differently. Some emphasise professional norms such as verification, transparency, and accountability, whereas others argue that ethical communication should also encompass relational dimensions including community trust, audience engagement, and social responsibility. This conceptual diversity suggests that ethical civic communication cannot be reduced solely to fact-checking practices but should instead be understood as a continuous process of negotiating competing expectations within platform-driven communication environments.

Ethical responsibility in digital civic communication involves several dimensions including factual verification, transparency of sources, accountability for misinformation, and sensitivity concerning public consequences (Millagala, 2023). Scholars emphasise that creators who engage in civic discussions function not merely as entertainers but also as influential communicators whose narratives may shape public perceptions and social trust (Swastiningsih et al., 2024; Suhana, 2025; Sulistya et al., 2025). Consequently, ethical content creation requires creators to balance influence with responsibility, particularly during periods of crisis, conflict, or heightened public uncertainty (Patalauskaite, 2024).

One of the major ethical challenges in digital civic communication concerns the tension between speed and verification. The fast-paced nature of social media encourages creators to publish content rapidly in order to maintain relevance and audience engagement. However, this urgency may weaken verification practices and increase the circulation of incomplete, misleading, or emotionally manipulated information (Melinda et al., 2023). In highly competitive visibility economies, creators may also prioritise sensational framing, outrage-driven narratives, or emotionally provocative storytelling because such approaches generate stronger engagement metrics and algorithmic amplification (Pandian et al., 2020).

Another ethical concern relates to audience loyalty and parasocial influence (Samadi & Imran, 2025). Many creators form strong emotional bonds with fans who view them as reliable or genuine voices. Although this trust can boost community involvement and civic engagement, it may also raise the possibility that information supplied by powerful creators will be accepted without question. In such situations, misinformation or biased interpretations may spread rapidly through highly loyal digital communities (Melinda et al., 2023).

Moreover, although misinformation and digital ethics have received considerable scholarly attention, comparatively fewer studies investigate the everyday ethical tensions experienced by digital creators while producing civic-oriented content. Most existing research

focuses either on the consequences of misinformation, audience behaviour, or platform regulation rather than examining how creators balance algorithmic visibility, audience expectations, civic responsibility, and ethical obligations during content production. Consequently, the ethical decision-making processes underpinning creator-driven civic communication remain insufficiently understood, particularly within comparative Southeast Asian contexts.

Despite these challenges, digital creators also possess significant potential to contribute positively to civic culture. Ethical creators can promote media literacy, encourage constructive dialogue, support accountability, and provide accessible explanations of complex societal issues. Transparency, corrections, and responsible sourcing practices can further strengthen public trust in digital communication environments. As a result, ethical civic content creation should be viewed as a crucial part of reliable and sustainable digital civic ecosystems rather than only as a restriction on influence.

Digital Civic Culture in Malaysia and Indonesia

Malaysia and Indonesia represent two important Southeast Asian contexts for examining the relationship between digital influence and civic communication (Lee et al., 2025). Both countries demonstrate high levels of social media penetration, strong mobile communication cultures, and rapidly expanding creator economies. Social networking platforms have become major spaces for public discussion, identity negotiation, political commentary, and community mobilisation, particularly among younger audiences (Sulistya et al., 2025).

Although Malaysia and Indonesia share several regional and cultural similarities, their civic communication environments display notable differences in terms of media culture, public trust, and communicative norms. In Malaysia, civic discourse often reflects stronger emphasis on institutional credibility, social stability, and responsibility-oriented communication. Public discussions frequently involve references to expert authority, official verification, and consensus-building approaches (Ahmad Faiz et al., 2009). Consequently, civic content creators in Malaysia may place greater emphasis on cautious framing and accountability-oriented narratives (Melinda et al., 2023).

In contrast, Indonesia's digital civic environment is often characterised by more dynamic public contestation and highly participatory online debate cultures. Civic communication in Indonesia frequently involves visible disagreements, rapid mobilisation, and pluralistic interpretations of social issues (Tarsidi et al., 2023). Digital creators in Indonesia often engage audiences through direct commentary, emotional storytelling, and real-time interactions that encourage public participation and collective debate (Nasrullah et al., 2026). These differences demonstrate how local communication cultures shape the ways digital influence controls within specific national contexts.

Although previous studies have generated valuable insights into digital communication within Malaysia and Indonesia, most investigations remain confined to national contexts or specific communication issues such as misinformation, political participation, influencer marketing, or platform governance. Comparatively fewer studies have examined how digital content creators negotiate ethical tensions while simultaneously functioning as civic communicators across different Southeast Asian contexts. As a result, limited understanding exists regarding how platform dynamics, ethical responsibility, and civic engagement intersect within creator-driven communication ecosystems. Addressing this gap requires a comparative analytical framework capable of capturing both the common

structural influences of digital platforms and the contextual differences that shape civic content creation in the two countries.

From a theoretical perspective, the comparison between Malaysia and Indonesia extends beyond identifying similarities and differences in digital communication practices. Rather, it provides an opportunity to examine how distinct sociocultural, political, and media environments shape the ways digital content creators negotiate common platform-driven pressures, including algorithmic visibility, audience expectations, ethical responsibility, and civic engagement. Viewing the two countries through this comparative lens enables a more nuanced understanding of ethical civic communication as a context-dependent process rather than a universal set of practices (Lee et al., 2025).

Building upon these unresolved issues, this study adopts a comparative qualitative approach to investigate how digital content creators in Malaysia and Indonesia navigate platform-driven civic spaces. Rather than examining digital influence, platform governance, or civic communication as separate phenomena, the study analyses their interrelationships through the lens of ethical content creation. By doing so, it contributes to a more integrated understanding of creator-driven civic communication within Southeast Asia and extends existing scholarship on digital influence beyond predominantly Western contexts.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study is guided by the connection of digital influence theory, platform power, and ethical civic communication. The conceptual framework believes that digital influence is shaped through the interaction between creators, audiences, and algorithmic systems within platform-driven communication environments. In this framework, creators apply framing strategies, narrative construction, sourcing practices, and engagement mechanisms to attract visibility and influence public understanding.

At the same time, platform algorithms function as mediating structures that amplify particular forms of content based on engagement performance and audience interaction. These algorithmic systems influence not only what content becomes visible but also how creators adapt their communication strategies to remain relevant within competitive attention economies. Consequently, tensions emerge between visibility and responsibility, speed and verification, as well as engagement and ethical accountability.

The framework further shows that civic communication outcomes are influenced by contextual factors including local media culture, public trust, and societal expectations regarding communication ethics. By comparing Malaysia and Indonesia, this study seeks to understand how digital creators navigate civic spaces within contrasting communicative environments while responding to shared pressures of platform-driven visibility and audience engagement.

Unlike previous studies that have generally examined digital influence, platform governance, or ethical communication independently, the present framework conceptualises these dimensions as mutually constitutive processes operating within platform-driven civic communication. The framework proposes that creator practices are shaped simultaneously by algorithmic visibility, audience engagement, and ethical decision-making, while recognising that these relationships are further mediated by local communication cultures. In doing so, the study extends existing understandings of digital civic communication beyond technology-centred explanations by incorporating ethical and contextual dimensions into the analysis of creator-driven civic influence.

METHODOLOGY

This study combined qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis. Qualitative content analysis was first employed to systematically examine publicly available digital content produced by the selected creators, focusing on communication themes, platform practices, and observable engagement patterns. The resulting observational data, together with interview transcripts, were subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify broader patterns of meaning regarding ethical civic communication. The integration of these complementary analytical approaches enabled triangulation between observed communication practices and participants' own accounts, thereby strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

The research focused on civic-oriented digital content disseminated through major social networking platforms, namely TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X. In this study, civic-oriented content refers to digital materials addressing public affairs, governance, social issues, community concerns, civic participation, and matters of public interest relevant to Malaysian and Indonesian audiences. Malaysia and Indonesia were selected as comparative contexts due to their high levels of social media penetration, rapidly expanding creator economies, and increasing reliance on digital platforms for civic communication and public discourse.

Data were collected over a four-month observation period from September to December 2025. This period was selected to capture recurring communication patterns and audience engagement across different civic issues discussed on digital platforms. Conducting the observation over several months enabled the researcher to identify consistent patterns of content creation rather than isolated communication events. The selected timeframe also coincided with active online discussions surrounding public affairs and community issues, providing a suitable context for examining how creators responded to evolving civic conversations within platform-driven environments.

To enhance contextual understanding, the study employed document analysis alongside digital content observation. Documents comprised online news reports and published materials related to digital influence, civic communication, and platform governance in Malaysia and Indonesia. These materials were obtained from established online news organisations, including *Astro Awani*, *The Star*, *Kompas*, and *Tempo*. The documents provided additional contextual insights into emerging civic issues, platform communication trends, and public debates, enabling the researcher to triangulate observations derived from digital content.

Digital content observation focused on publicly accessible civic-oriented content produced by six purposively selected digital creators, comprising three creators from Malaysia and three from Indonesia. The creators were selected based on three criteria: (i) consistent production of civic-oriented content, (ii) substantial audience engagement and visibility within their respective digital communities, and (iii) active discussion of public-interest issues. To minimise reputational implications and maintain ethical sensitivity, the identities of the creators were anonymised throughout the study.

This study employed purposive sampling to select six digital content creators from Malaysia and Indonesia. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study sought information-rich participants who actively produce civic-oriented digital content and possess extensive experience engaging with public issues on digital platforms. Rather than aiming for statistical representation, participant selection focused on identifying creators capable of providing in-depth insights into ethical decision-making within platform-driven

civic communication. The six creators represented diverse content niches, including social commentary, public education, community advocacy, and current affairs, thereby allowing the study to capture a broad range of perspectives while maintaining analytical depth.

The observed materials included short-form videos, livestream discussions, commentary posts, and explanatory content relating to governance, public affairs, and societal issues. Throughout the observation period, the researcher examined recurring communication patterns, framing strategies, narrative construction, audience engagement mechanisms, verification practices, and ethical communication behaviours that characterised platform-driven civic discourse.

Audience reach and engagement were assessed using publicly available platform metrics rather than as quantitative outcome variables. Reach was indicated by the approximate number of followers or subscribers across the creators' primary digital platforms, while engagement was evaluated through observable interaction indicators, including average views, likes, comments, shares, and audience participation in discussions. These metrics were used solely to ensure that selected participants maintained active communication with their audiences and were not subjected to statistical analysis.

Digital content observation complemented the interviews by providing contextual evidence of participants' communication practices. Each creator's publicly available content was observed over a six-month period preceding the interviews. Observation focused on civic-oriented posts, communication style, audience interaction, ethical practices, content themes, platform features, and engagement patterns. Field notes were maintained throughout the observation process to document emerging patterns, examples of ethical decision-making, and observable communication strategies. These observational data were subsequently integrated with interview findings during analysis.

Interview transcripts and observation notes were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) six-phase thematic analysis. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively to capture meaningful segments related to digital influence, platform practices, ethical tensions, and civic communication. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed by comparing coded extracts across all participants and observation notes to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinction. Fifth, themes were refined, defined, and named to reflect the central meanings emerging from the data. Finally, representative quotations were selected to support the interpretation of each theme.

Coding was conducted primarily by the principal researcher to ensure consistency throughout the analytical process. To enhance analytical credibility, selected transcripts and preliminary coding decisions were independently reviewed by an experienced qualitative researcher with expertise in digital communication. Differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached regarding theme development.

Although this study adopted a qualitative research design, simple descriptive frequencies were used to illustrate the prevalence of themes identified during coding. These numerical summaries were not intended for statistical inference or hypothesis testing but were used solely to enhance transparency by indicating how frequently particular issues emerged across participants and observational data. Thematic interpretation remained the primary analytical approach, while frequency counts served as supplementary descriptive indicators.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation between interviews and digital content observation, and peer debriefing during data interpretation. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining detailed documentation of coding decisions and analytical procedures throughout the study. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo writing and continual comparison between emerging themes and the original data. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of participants, research contexts, and digital communication environments to enable readers to determine the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Since the study analysed only publicly accessible digital content, no private or restricted materials were collected. Nevertheless, the research remained sensitive to issues of representation, contextual interpretation, and potential reputational implications concerning digital creators. Accordingly, the analysis focused on communication practices, civic narratives, and platform dynamics rather than evaluating or judging individual creators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study analysed civic-oriented digital content produced by selected creators across Malaysia and Indonesia within platform-driven communication environments. Data were collected from publicly accessible materials on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X over the observation period. The analysis focused on communicative patterns, audience engagement mechanisms, framing strategies, ethical practices, and platform-driven visibility associated with civic discourse.

A total of 120 civic-oriented content samples were observed and categorised according to platform type, content format, and communicative focus. The findings demonstrate that digital influence in civic spaces is strongly shaped by platform visibility systems, emotional engagement strategies, and audience interaction patterns.

Mechanisms of Digital Influence Used by Content Creators

The first objective of this study was to identify the mechanisms of digital influence employed by civic-oriented content creators in Malaysia and Indonesia. Analysis of the 120 observed content samples indicates that digital influence is not determined solely by the popularity of creators or the size of their follower base. Rather, it is shaped through the strategic interaction between content framing, audience engagement practices, and platform algorithms, which collectively influence the visibility, circulation, and interpretation of civic information. These findings reinforce the argument that digital influence within platform-driven environments is increasingly negotiated through algorithmic visibility and audience interaction rather than institutional authority (Walter & Friesike, 2025; Gandini et al., 2025).

A total of 120 civic-oriented content samples were analysed across TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X. As presented in Table 1, TikTok recorded the highest number of observed civic-oriented content (40), followed by YouTube (30), Instagram (22), Facebook (14), and X (14). The dominance of TikTok and YouTube suggests that creators increasingly favour platforms that provide stronger algorithmic amplification and greater opportunities for audience interaction. While TikTok facilitates the rapid dissemination of concise, emotionally engaging civic narratives through short-form videos, YouTube supports more detailed discussions, issue explainers, and livestream sessions that enable creators to provide context and encourage sustained audience engagement.

Table 1: Distribution of civic-oriented content by platform

Platform	Malaysia	Indonesia	Total Content Observed
TikTok	18	22	40
Instagram	12	10	22
YouTube	14	16	30
Facebook	8	6	14
X (Twitter)	7	7	14
Total	59	61	120

Rather than functioning merely as channels for information dissemination, these platforms shape how civic issues are presented and consumed. The findings indicate that platform affordances encourage creators to adapt their communication strategies to maximise visibility and engagement. This observation supports previous studies that argue algorithmic recommendation systems reward content capable of generating stronger user interaction, regardless of its civic significance or informational depth (Rustamova, 2025; Zhang, 2025).

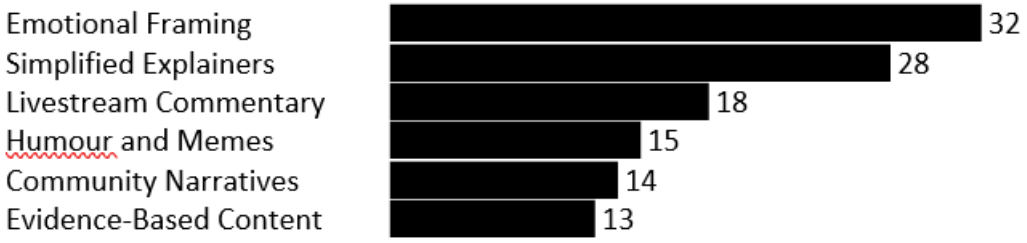


Figure 1: Dominant communication strategies in civic content

Thematic analysis further identified several recurring communication strategies employed by creators to strengthen digital influence, as illustrated in Figure 1. Emotional framing emerged as the most dominant strategy, followed by simplified explainers, livestream commentary, humour and memes, community narratives, and evidence-based content. Creators frequently employed emotions such as urgency, empathy, moral concern, and public outrage to attract audience attention and encourage interaction. These findings suggest that emotional framing has become the dominant mechanism of digital influence because platform affordances reward content capable of generating rapid audience interaction, prolonged viewing time, and algorithmic amplification. Rather than functioning merely as a persuasive communication strategy, emotional framing represents an adaptive response to engagement-driven platform logics in which creators continuously negotiate visibility through audience reactions. This finding supports the proposition of platform power theory that communication practices are increasingly shaped by algorithmic infrastructures rather than solely by creators' editorial intentions.

Although emotional framing was evident among creators in both Malaysia and Indonesia, differences emerged in how emotions were strategically employed. Malaysian creators generally embedded emotional appeals within moderated and responsibility-oriented narratives that reflected greater emphasis on institutional credibility and social harmony. Indonesian creators, by contrast, more frequently combined emotional storytelling with direct audience interaction and participatory discussion. These differences suggest that while platform affordances encourage similar engagement strategies across both countries,

local communication cultures continue to influence how emotional narratives are constructed and received.

Simplified explainers represented the second most prominent communication strategy. These were particularly evident in content addressing governance, public policy, and current social issues, where creators translated complex information into concise and easily understood narratives. Such an approach appears particularly effective in reaching younger audiences who primarily consume information through short-form videos and mobile-based platforms. At the same time, livestream commentary and interactive discussions were more prominent among Indonesian creators, reflecting a stronger culture of participatory engagement in digital civic communication. Malaysian creators, in contrast, generally adopted more structured and moderated approaches, placing greater emphasis on explanation and contextualisation than real-time interaction.

The findings further demonstrate that effective digital influence extends beyond audience size. Instead, influence is achieved through the strategic combination of narrative construction, emotional engagement, platform-specific affordances, and algorithmic visibility. Creators who successfully aligned these elements were more likely to stimulate public discussion, encourage audience participation, and sustain civic engagement across digital platforms. This suggests that digital influence within contemporary civic spaces is increasingly co-produced by creators, audiences, and platform algorithms, rather than residing solely in the authority of individual communicators.

Ethical Challenges Associated with Civic Content Creation

The second objective of this study was to analyse the ethical challenges associated with civic-oriented content creation within platform-driven communication environments. The findings indicate that content creators in both Malaysia and Indonesia operate within increasingly complex digital ecosystems where the pursuit of audience engagement often intersects with ethical responsibilities. Rather than functioning solely as information providers, creators are required to continuously negotiate competing demands related to platform visibility, audience expectations, and responsible communication. These tensions reflect the broader influence of platform algorithms, which frequently reward engagement, immediacy, and emotional appeal over careful verification and contextual reporting.

Table 2: Ethical tensions in civic-oriented content creation

Ethical Tension Identified	Frequency
Speed vs Verification	34
Influence vs Responsibility	27
Audience Loyalty vs Accuracy	21
Outrage Incentives vs Civic Understanding	20
Pressure for Continuous Content Production	18

The most significant ethical challenge identified in the analysis was the tension between speed and verification. Creators often responded rapidly to developing public issues in order to maintain visibility and relevance within highly competitive digital environments. However, rapid content production occasionally weakened verification processes and increased the circulation of speculative or incomplete information.

Thematic analysis identified five recurring ethical tensions across the observed content, as presented in Table 2. The most prominent challenge was the tension between speed and verification (34 occurrences), followed by influence versus responsibility (27),

audience loyalty versus accuracy (21), outrage incentives versus civic understanding (20), and pressure for continuous content production (18). Collectively, these findings suggest that the ethical challenges faced by creators extend beyond individual decision-making and are closely shaped by the structural characteristics of platform-driven communication environments.

Among these challenges, speed k,=..///versus verification emerged as the most dominant ethical concern. Creators frequently responded to developing civic issues in real time to maintain relevance and visibility within highly competitive digital environments. However, the pressure to publish quickly occasionally reduced opportunities for thorough fact-checking, source verification, and contextual explanation. While rapid dissemination enables timely public engagement, it also increases the possibility of circulating incomplete or inaccurate information. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that the logic of platform communication prioritises immediacy, often placing verification processes under considerable pressure (Tambe & Hussein, 2023).

The findings also reveal an ongoing tension between influence and responsibility. As creators increasingly function as alternative civic communicators, their ability to shape public understanding carries greater ethical obligations. Nevertheless, the analysis indicates that not all creators consistently incorporated transparent sourcing, balanced perspectives, or adequate contextualisation into their content. In several instances, emotionally engaging narratives and personalised interpretations received greater audience attention than evidence-based explanations, reflecting the influence of algorithmic systems that reward engagement-oriented communication. These observations reinforce concerns that digital influence may strengthen civic participation while simultaneously increasing the risk of oversimplification and selective interpretation of public issues.

Another significant challenge concerns the relationship between audience loyalty and factual accuracy. Highly engaged online communities often amplified creators' narratives through rapid sharing, supportive comments, and repeated interaction, thereby strengthening creators' influence within their respective digital networks. While such engagement encourages civic participation and community-building, it may also reduce critical evaluation of the information being shared. In both Malaysian and Indonesian contexts, several examples suggested that strong audience trust occasionally resulted in greater acceptance of creators' interpretations without independent verification, illustrating how parasocial relationships can reinforce the circulation of particular narratives.

The analysis further identified tensions between outrage-driven engagement and meaningful civic understanding. Content framed around conflict, controversy, or emotional reactions generally generated higher levels of audience interaction than more balanced or evidence-based discussions. Although such strategies enhanced visibility and platform reach, they sometimes encouraged simplified or polarised interpretations of complex civic issues. This finding suggests that algorithmically amplified engagement may inadvertently privilege emotional responses over informed public deliberation, thereby influencing the quality of civic discourse.

Despite these challenges, the findings also reveal encouraging examples of responsible civic communication. Several creators demonstrated a commitment to ethical practices by acknowledging errors, providing corrections, citing credible sources, and offering contextual explanations of complex issues. These practices not only enhanced the credibility of their content but also contributed to strengthening public trust within digital communication environments. The findings therefore suggest that ethical civic content

creation remains achievable, even within platform ecosystems characterised by intense competition for visibility and audience engagement.

Despite these ethical tensions, several creators demonstrated that responsible civic communication remains achievable within platform-driven environments. Their practices of transparent correction, contextual explanation, and evidence-based discussion suggest that ethical communication is not incompatible with digital influence but requires continuous negotiation between platform incentives and civic responsibility. These findings further indicate that creators exercise agency within algorithmically mediated systems by selectively balancing audience expectations with professional and ethical considerations. Rather than viewing ethical responsibility as a fixed standard, the findings illustrate that it is an ongoing communicative process shaped by interactions between creators, audiences, and platform architectures.

Comparatively, Malaysian creators appeared more likely to prioritise verification and cautious framing when addressing sensitive civic issues, whereas Indonesian creators demonstrated greater tolerance for spontaneous engagement and real-time interaction. These differences do not necessarily indicate higher or lower ethical standards but rather reflect contrasting communication cultures and audience expectations operating within similar platform environments.

Implications of Platform-Driven Communication on Public Trust and Civic Understanding

The third objective of this study was to explore the implications of platform-driven communication on public trust and civic understanding in Malaysia and Indonesia. The findings indicate that platform algorithms, audience engagement mechanisms, and visibility-oriented communication practices play a significant role in shaping how civic information is produced, interpreted, and trusted within contemporary digital environments. While these platforms have expanded opportunities for civic participation and access to information, they have also introduced new challenges related to information credibility, ethical communication, and informed public deliberation.

Across both Malaysia and Indonesia, digital creators increasingly functioned as alternative civic communicators who influenced public attention, issue framing, and the interpretation of societal concerns. Through simplified explanations, interactive discussions, and real-time engagement, creators made civic information more accessible, particularly to younger audiences who rely heavily on social media as their primary source of information. These findings suggest that digital creators are no longer merely content producers but have become influential intermediaries between public issues and digital audiences, shaping both awareness and participation within contemporary civic spaces.

However, the findings also demonstrate that platform-driven communication encourages creators to adapt their content to algorithmic preferences that prioritise engagement and visibility. Content characterised by emotional appeal, rapid dissemination, and high audience interaction frequently received greater algorithmic amplification than more balanced or evidence-based discussions. As a result, complex civic issues were often communicated through simplified narratives that favoured immediacy and audience engagement over contextual depth. This observation supports previous arguments that platform algorithms increasingly influence not only the visibility of information but also the ways in which civic issues are framed and understood by the public (Walter & Friesike, 2025; Rustamova, 2025). These findings suggest that platform algorithms do more than determine content visibility; they actively shape the communicative logic through which civic issues are

presented and interpreted. Because engagement-oriented algorithms reward emotionally resonant and highly interactive content, creators increasingly adapt their communication strategies to maximise visibility while simultaneously attempting to maintain credibility. Consequently, public trust is influenced not only by the accuracy of civic information but also by how platform infrastructures privilege particular forms of communication over others.

Comparative analysis revealed that although creators in Malaysia and Indonesia operated under similar algorithmic conditions, their communicative responses reflected distinct national contexts. Malaysian creators generally adopted more cautious framing strategies that emphasised institutional legitimacy, consensus-building, and responsible civic messaging. Indonesian creators, in contrast, were more likely to encourage participatory dialogue, direct audience engagement, and emotionally expressive narratives. These differences suggest that platform affordances alone cannot fully explain creator behaviour. Instead, local sociocultural values, media traditions, and public communication norms continue to shape how creators negotiate visibility, ethical responsibility, and civic participation within platform-driven environments.

These structural pressures have important implications for public trust. While digital creators have the capacity to enhance civic awareness and encourage public participation, the increasing emphasis on engagement-driven communication may also contribute to uncertainty regarding the credibility of online information. The findings suggest that public trust is influenced not only by the content itself but also by the transparency, consistency, and ethical practices demonstrated by creators. Creators who provided evidence-based explanations, acknowledged uncertainties, and corrected inaccuracies were generally perceived as more credible, whereas highly emotional or sensationalised content risked undermining confidence in civic information. This reinforces the argument that trust within digital communication environments is closely associated with ethical communication practices rather than platform popularity alone.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital influence within civic communication should be understood as the outcome of continuous interaction between creators, audiences, and platform infrastructures rather than the product of creator popularity alone. The comparative findings further indicate that while platform power establishes similar structural pressures across digital environments, the ways creators respond to these pressures remain strongly influenced by local communication cultures. Consequently, ethical civic communication emerges not as a universal practice but as a context-dependent process through which creators negotiate visibility, responsibility, and public trust within increasingly algorithmically mediated communication ecosystems.

These findings therefore suggest that platform affordances should be understood not merely as technological infrastructures but as ethical environments that shape how creators negotiate civic responsibility and public trust.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, this study extends existing scholarship on digital influence and platform power by demonstrating that ethical negotiation constitutes the critical mechanism through which digital creators balance algorithm-driven visibility with civic responsibility. Rather than viewing platform affordances as purely technological structures, the findings suggest that they also operate as ethical environments within which creators continuously negotiate credibility, public trust, and audience engagement.

At the same time, the study highlights the complex ethical realities of producing civic content in platform-driven environments. Content creators frequently found themselves navigating competing demands and expectations. Among the most prominent challenges were balancing speed with verification, influence with responsibility, and audience loyalty with factual accuracy. Another recurring tension involved the pressure to generate engagement—often through emotionally charged or controversial content—while still promoting meaningful civic understanding. These challenges reflect the increasingly complicated nature of civic communication in digital spaces, where visibility is often rewarded and tone can be overlooked. While some creators prioritised rapid dissemination and audience engagement, others demonstrated a stronger commitment to ethical communication through transparent corrections, contextualised explanations, and evidence-based discussions. Such practices suggest that responsible civic influence remains possible, even within highly competitive and algorithm-driven communication ecosystems.

Beyond the mechanisms of influence and the ethical challenges faced by creators, the findings also point to the broader implications of platform-driven communication for public trust and civic understanding in Malaysia and Indonesia. Digital creators undoubtedly play an important role in enhancing civic awareness, increasing access to information, and encouraging public participation in societal issues. However, the very structures that enable their visibility can also create unintended consequences. Platform algorithms often reward content that is emotionally engaging, easily digestible, and highly shareable. As a result, complex civic issues may be simplified, contextual nuances overlooked, and public discussions increasingly shaped by emotional reactions rather than informed deliberation.

The comparative analysis further suggests that local communication cultures continue to influence how civic participation is expressed online. While creators in Malaysia generally adopted more cautious and moderated approaches when discussing sensitive public issues, their counterparts in Indonesia appeared more inclined towards direct engagement, expressive commentary, and highly participatory interactions with audiences. These differences highlight the importance of considering local socio-cultural contexts when examining digital civic communication, even within countries that share similar technological and platform environments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to digital communication scholarship by demonstrating that digital influence cannot be adequately explained through creator popularity or platform algorithms alone. Instead, influence emerges from the dynamic interaction between platform affordances, creator agency, ethical decision-making, and audience engagement. The comparative findings further suggest that these relationships are mediated by local communication cultures, indicating that ethical civic communication should be understood as a context-dependent rather than universally applicable process. This integrated perspective extends existing theories of digital influence and platform power by incorporating ethical negotiation as a central mechanism through which civic communication is produced within contemporary social media environments.

Like any research, this study is not without limitations. The analysis was confined to a qualitative examination of selected publicly accessible content and therefore does not claim to represent the full diversity of civic communication practices across Malaysia and Indonesia. Future studies could extend this work through quantitative investigations, audience reception studies, or longitudinal analyses that examine changes in digital civic communication over time. Further research may also explore the growing influence of platform governance mechanisms, artificial intelligence-driven recommendation systems, and the evolving creator

economy in shaping the future relationship between digital influence, public trust, and civic communication across Southeast Asia.

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