

# Exploring the Impact of WhatsApp on Political Discussions and Participation in the Disruptive Era

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## ABSTRACT

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*Keywords:*  
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WhatsApp.

This research explores the impact of WhatsApp on political discourse and participation in the digital age. With the rise of social media platforms like WhatsApp, the dissemination, discussion, and debate of political information have become faster and more accessible, shaping public political views and engagement. The study investigates how WhatsApp facilitates information sharing, fosters political discussion, and enhances connectivity among politically like-minded individuals. However, it also examines the challenges posed by the spread of misinformation and the creation of echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with exploratory techniques, the research highlights how interactions on WhatsApp influence users' political knowledge, opinion formation, and involvement in political activities. Findings suggest that active users benefit from increased political mobilization, but also underscore the importance of digital literacy in critically navigating political content. The research acknowledges limitations related to sample representation, qualitative data subjectivity, and the difficulty of measuring the concrete impact of WhatsApp on political participation.

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## INTRODUCTION

The era of social media has fundamentally transformed the development of information technology. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become essential communication tools for billions of people worldwide. According to Saputra et al. (2023), information technology enables anyone to become a news source and report events in real time through social media. This not only changes how people interact but also reshapes the way society engages in governmental and political issues (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

WhatsApp has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms globally, including in Indonesia, where the country is actively promoting digital growth. According to Nurhayati-Wolff (2021), the number of social media users in Indonesia is expected to rise from 193.430 million in 2021 to 236.970 million in 2026. WhatsApp is used not only for information exchange but also in business, politics, education, and healthcare. It plays a vital role in political discussions, allowing users to exchange opinions, organize political campaigns, and mobilize people for political events such as rallies.

Political discussions on WhatsApp are defined as the exchange of ideas, views, and arguments on political issues between individuals or groups (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). According to Kraft & Furlong (2020), political discussions usually cover topics such as public policy, government, human rights, economics, and other social issues. WhatsApp is often used by governments or political parties to monitor public sentiment toward specific policies.

However, alongside the convenience of accessing information, the platform also presents significant challenges, such as the spread of hoaxes. Political hoaxes are often designed to incite negative emotions, such as anger towards certain parties, leading to increased polarization and social conflict (Utami, 2018). These hoaxes harm the reputation of individuals, parties, or institutions without valid evidence (Kasim et al., 2021), potentially destabilizing politics and disrupting the democratic process.

Several studies have explored the role of WhatsApp in political contexts. Pereira et al. (2022) examined WhatsApp's role in Brazil, demonstrating how the platform frequently becomes a tool for spreading misleading information. Evangelista and Bruno (2019) discussed how Bolsonaro's political campaign in Brazil tapped into conservative sentiments and used WhatsApp to quickly disseminate disinformation. Similarly, Cheeseman et al. (2020) highlighted WhatsApp's role in influencing elections in countries like Brazil, India, and Nigeria by spreading rumors and lies.

Conversely, Arthur (2020) and Kamga (2020) emphasize the need for better public education on the use of digital technologies and clear policies guiding social media usage in the political sphere. Alamsyah et al. (2021) noted that while social media allows for the rapid spread

of information, the credibility of such information often lacks. Social media can extend the reach of information, but when it lacks accuracy, it can distort public opinion.

Kafka et al. (2022) found that first-time voters often rely on social media as their primary source of political information and engage with political views that align with their beliefs. However, the influence of social media on their political orientation is not uniform, with variations depending on trust in information sources and individual characteristics.

In this disruptive digital era, WhatsApp's role in political discussions brings both positive and negative consequences. The platform facilitates broader political participation but also opens the door for misinformation. Therefore, it is crucial for users to be critical and selective when receiving and sharing information from trusted sources.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The role of social media, particularly WhatsApp, in political discourse and participation has been extensively examined in various studies, offering insights into its benefits and challenges. This section reviews key literature from journal articles, books, government reports, and websites to understand WhatsApp's impact on political discussions and participation.

### **Social Media and Political Participation**

Social media has transformed political participation by offering accessible platforms for communication, campaigning, and mobilization. Huckfeldt et al. (2004) explored how political discussions have evolved from traditional public settings to digital platforms like WhatsApp, where users engage in real-time exchanges of political ideas. Kraft & Furlong (2020) highlight that social media enables discussions on public policy, governance, human rights, and other social issues, expanding political awareness and participation.

According to Udenze and Oshionebo (2020), WhatsApp's group chat feature has become a powerful tool for organizing political campaigns and mobilizing supporters. The platform allows political actors to coordinate campaigns, share information, and discuss political issues. These developments align with the findings of Cheeseman et al. (2020), who discuss the centrality of WhatsApp in political discourse during elections in Brazil, India, and Nigeria.

### **WhatsApp and the Spread of Misinformation**

Despite its positive contributions, WhatsApp is also linked to the spread of misinformation. Utami (2018) and Recuero et al. (2021) argue that political hoaxes on WhatsApp can provoke negative emotions and deepen social polarization. They further discuss the formation of "echo

chambers," where misinformation circulates unchecked, amplifying false narratives.

Kasim et al. (2021) explored how political hoaxes damage public trust in political institutions and lead to political instability. Judge and Korhani (2020) emphasized that misinformation on WhatsApp can distort voter perceptions and undermine electoral processes.

### **WhatsApp in Political Campaigns**

WhatsApp has been instrumental in political campaigns, especially in shaping public opinion. Evangelista and Bruno (2019) examined Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign, which utilized WhatsApp to disseminate conservative narratives. Pereira et al. (2022) provided further insights into how the platform mobilized support during political disruptions in Brazil.

In Nigeria, India, and Brazil, WhatsApp has been described as a critical tool for what Cheeseman et al. (2020) termed "WhatsApp elections," where the rapid spread of rumors, conjectures, and misinformation complicated the democratic process.

### **Public Trust in Political Systems**

Elislah (2023) emphasizes that trust in political systems is essential for democracy to thrive. However, the misuse of WhatsApp for spreading political hoaxes has contributed to increased political cynicism. This mistrust is dangerous as it undermines the legitimacy of governmental institutions, an issue also addressed by Arthur (2020), who calls for better digital literacy education to mitigate the negative impacts of social media.

### **New Voters and Social Media Influence**

Research shows that young, first-time voters are particularly influenced by social media. Kafka et al. (2022) examined how high school students use WhatsApp as their primary source of political information, influencing their political orientation. This demographic interacts with political views that align with their beliefs, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing opinions.

### **Addressing the Spread of Misinformation**

Efforts to address the spread of misinformation on WhatsApp have been widely discussed in academic and governmental reports. Arthur (2020) and Kamga (2020) highlight the importance of public education and stricter regulations to ensure that WhatsApp is not used to disrupt democratic processes. Jain et al. (2021) suggest that technology companies must enhance their security systems to minimize the risk of misinformation and hoaxes.

## **METHOD**

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the role of WhatsApp social media in the context of Political Discussions and Participation in the disruptive era. Qualitative research is research that focuses on understanding social life problems based on realistic conditions and a holistic, detailed and complex natural environment. Apart from that, this research also uses an inductive approach which aims to build a theory (hypothesis) by going through the process of revealing a fact (Murdiyanto, 2020). The attention of qualitative research is more focused on human elements, objects and institutions, as well as the relationships or interactions between these elements, to understand an event, behavior or phenomenon (Mohamed et al., 2010). The researcher made observations of community participation related to local political discussions. Researchers also found several hoax issues related to fake government news. The approach taken is literature study. According to Flick (2015, p. 17), literature study is carried out to enrich knowledge about various concepts that will be used as a basis or guide in the research process. Researchers use reading literature to strengthen the results of discussions through journals and books/e-books. Data collection was carried out by collecting data from observations, journals, articles, proceedings, books, and even documents related to the impact of using WhatsApp media in political participation and discussion. Data analysis in literature review research is an important process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing information from various sources relevant to the research topic. The technique is carried out with a systematic and structured approach to produce valid and reliable conclusions about the impacts arising from the use of WhatsApp social media in political discussions and participation.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Role of WhatsApp in Political Discussions and Participation in the Disruptive Era**

WhatsApp plays a significant and complex role in political discussions and participation, particularly in the disruptive era of digital communication. Its main contribution lies in the rapid and wide dissemination of political information, which allows users to share messages, images, videos, and articles with large audiences in real-time. Political parties, activists, and citizens use WhatsApp to mobilize support, coordinate protests, and influence public opinion, but it also poses challenges due to the spread of misinformation and fake news, which can distort public perceptions and affect democratic processes.

WhatsApp group features enable users to engage in democratic discussions, share opinions, and participate in political mobilization efforts, such as protests or campaigns. The platform also provides opportunities for grassroots movements and marginalized voices to organize, communicate,

and advocate for their causes, democratizing political engagement. However, the fast dissemination of information also brings risks, particularly the spread of hoaxes or fake news. Users are encouraged to verify information and maintain responsible communication in political discussions to ensure constructive and productive discourse.

Additionally, WhatsApp offers a more private space for focused political conversations compared to public platforms like Facebook or Twitter, but this can lead to political polarization. The 2024 Indonesian General Election, for instance, showed a decline in tolerance due to social media's role in political polarization and negative campaigns.

In conclusion, while WhatsApp enhances political participation and facilitates open discussion, its use requires digital literacy and critical thinking to prevent the risks of misinformation and ensure healthy political dialogue.

### **The Impact of WhatsApp's Role on Political Discussions and Participation in the Disruptive Era**

WhatsApp plays a significant role in political discussions and participation, especially in the disruptive era, where the rapid spread of misinformation and hoaxes is common. Fake news shared on WhatsApp, particularly during elections, can skew political perceptions and damage the reputation of political figures. In Indonesia, hoaxes have been prevalent since the 2014 presidential election and have worsened during the 2019 election, contributing to a post-truth environment where emotions and personal beliefs override objective facts.

The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Communication and Information, has blocked numerous websites spreading false information, hate speech, and unethical content. Criminal penalties exist under Law No. 19 of 2016 to punish hoax spreaders.

On the positive side, WhatsApp enables direct political engagement between leaders and voters, increasing transparency and participation. However, hoaxes have contributed to growing distrust in mainstream media, leading people to turn to fake media. The post-truth era has deepened societal divisions and skepticism, making ethical communication and verification of information more important than ever. Additionally, continuous exposure to hoaxes can trigger negative emotions, resulting in societal tensions and conflicts.

### **CONCLUSION**

WhatsApp plays a crucial and multifaceted role in contemporary political engagement. It facilitates rapid and widespread dissemination of political information, allowing messages, images, videos, and articles to reach a large audience quickly. This capability is instrumental in

mobilizing support, coordinating protests, and influencing public opinion. The platform fosters direct interaction among political actors and citizens, enhancing transparency and accountability in political processes. However, the ease of information sharing on WhatsApp also presents challenges, particularly the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. These issues can distort public perception and undermine trust in institutions, contributing to a phenomenon known as "post-truth" politics. To mitigate these risks, users must exercise caution, verify information before sharing, and uphold ethical standards in their online interactions. Despite its pitfalls, WhatsApp remains a powerful tool for democratizing political participation and amplifying diverse voices in society.

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