

HOW @RICOWAAS INSTAGRAM ELECTION CONTENT SHAPES STUDENT POLITICAL AWARENESS AT UIN SUMATER UTARA

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Abstract

We analyzed how Pilkada content on the @ricowaas Instagram account shapes political awareness among students at UINSU. To do this, we studied posts from the 2024 Medan City Pilkada campaign and interviewed eight students. We found that the content mostly highlighted personal branding, community interactions, and campaign promises. It helped increase student knowledge, though it did not directly dictate their voting choices. Students showed different levels of awareness. Some focused on simple visual branding, while others practiced critical awareness, verifying facts, comparing sources, and weighing actual work programs before forming an opinion. Ultimately, our research shows that social media's true value is not just in grabbing attention; it is in sparking critical thinking. Thus, political actors should use social media for voter education, not only to spread one-way messages but also to create spaces for dialogue that build political literacy among young people.

Keywords: *Instagram Content, Content Analysis, Political Awareness, College Students*

Introduction

The digital era has changed the way university students access political information (Azzahra & Rina, 2025). Today, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X are no longer just spaces for entertainment. They have become stages for sharing information, learning about politics, and shaping public opinion (Faiza Bajwa, 2025). Ideally, social media should help students build sound political literacy and develop critical, rational awareness grounded in ethical values, including Islamic values for Muslim students, especially during regional head elections (Pilkada) (Olii et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of social media as a tool for political education often clashes with challenges in digital literacy and exposure to polarizing content (Setiawan et al., 2025). Many social media users still struggle to distinguish facts from manipulation, so this potential for political education often goes unrealized (Andini et al., 2025). We therefore need to understand how students process, assess, and interpret the political stories they encounter online (Ramadhein & Krismayani, 2025).

This trend aligns with the surge in the number of internet users in Indonesia. A 2024 survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) found 221,563,479 internet users out of a total population of 278,696,200. This figure represents an internet penetration rate of 79.5 percent; an increase of 1.4 percent compared to the previous period. This upward trend has also been visible over the past several years, with Indonesia's internet penetration rate recorded at 64.8 percent in 2018, rising to 73.7 percent in 2020, 77.02 percent in 2022, 78.19 percent in 2023, and reaching 79.5 percent in 2024 (Jumlah Pengguna Internet Indonesia Tembus 221 Juta Orang, 2024). These figures show that internet access is now part of daily life: people use it to get information, communicate, and take part in social activities online.

Today, many young people turn to social media, especially Instagram, for political information (Dewi et al., 2025). Instagram's role in political communication became especially clear during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections (Pilkada Serentak). Various pairs of regional head candidates used official Instagram accounts to introduce themselves to the public, build their political image, convey their vision and mission, publicize their work programs, and document various campaign

activities (Nurnisya & Kasmani, 2025; Pardede & Iswadi, 2025). Through content dominated by photos, videos, and visual design, Instagram has become an effective medium for reaching the public, especially the younger generation who are active social media users. These features also bring candidates and the public closer. Political information becomes more appealing, easier to understand, and easier to access (Pardede & Iswadi, 2025).

In the 2024 Medan City Regional Election (Pilkada Kota Medan), the Instagram account @ricowaas actively shared political content. This account regularly uploaded campaign activities, interactions with residents, presentations of vision and mission, and documentation of activities throughout the Pilkada. Beyond conveying information to the public, these uploads were also used as part of a political communication strategy to build the candidate's image and attract public sympathy. The account shows how social media shaped the 2024 Medan Pilkada. Through the various content it uploaded, the account showed how political messages were packaged and conveyed to the public through a digital platform. This strategy shows how politicians use social media to shape public perception and set the campaign agenda (Adhipratama, 2025).

University students are among the most active social media users and voters who can access and evaluate political information (Mudalagi & Kamble, 2026). Instagram makes it easier for students to understand current political issues (Murugesan & Prabha, 2026). However, frequent exposure to political content does not always build critical political awareness (Gupta & Bhardwaj, 2024). Content packaged through appealing visuals, persuasive narratives, or candidates' personal branding has the potential to influence how students view an issue or a candidate (Garg & Suri, 2026). Therefore, students need digital literacy and a critical approach to assess information before accepting it (Putra et al., 2025). Student engagement in this digital space is also influenced by the strategies of influencers or political figures in packaging messages in a more casual and accessible way, which in turn can mobilize support and political participation (Saragih et al., 2024). Because visual elements and inspiring stories capture young people's attention, communication strategy matters. It can determine whether political messages lead to real public participation (Noviafni et al., 2025).

Several previous studies have shown that Instagram has an influence on political participation, political preference, and political literacy among students (Putra et al., 2025). However, most of these studies still discuss the use of Instagram in general terms or focus on specific political media accounts, such as @PinterPolitik (Yadi Supriadi, 2024). Meanwhile, few studies examine how content on the official accounts of regional head candidates shapes students' political awareness (Payden, 2025). This gap motivates our study. We used the Instagram account @ricowaas as a case study to examine how candidate content influences students' political awareness, particularly at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU). This study examines how effective digital campaign communication in facilitating the transformation of political knowledge into active participation among first-time voters (Beriansyah & Qibtiyah, 2023). In addition, the effectiveness of authentic and transparent digital communication strategies can increase young voters' interest in socio-political issues relevant to their daily lives (Putri et al., 2025).

We examine how Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas shapes political awareness among students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU). We ask two questions: (1) what are the characteristics of the Pilkada content published through the Instagram account @ricowaas during the 2024 Medan City Pilkada campaign period; and (2) what role does the Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas play in shaping the political awareness of UINSU students. We formulated these questions to examine the relationship between the candidate's digital communication strategy and the way students, as young voters active on social media, form their political awareness. We analyze content, information, and interaction to see whether digital political messages turn exposure to information into stronger political attitudes and participation (Gunawan & Supriadi, 2024). The use of social media by political actors is now a practical way to reach first-time voters, given that the intensity of digital platform use positively affects their electoral activity (Rescanila et al., 2025) (WIDJAYA & Wono, 2025).

We used two theories that work together. First, we used Eriyanto's (2011) content analysis approach to identify, classify, and interpret political messages in posts from the Instagram account @ricowaas. Second, we used Paulo Freire's theory of conscientização, or critical awareness, focusing on two types of consciousness: naive and critical

(Rohinah, 2019) (Robinson et al., 2021), to understand how students interpret political information on social media. This theoretical framework allows the researcher to assess whether the posts lead to surface-level consumption or encourage students to reflect critically on the political reality around them (Febriyan et al., 2025). Together, these frameworks let us map communication patterns that build the candidate's image and create a healthy space for discussion and public participation (Alhuda, 2025).

We chose the State Islamic University of North Sumatra as the research setting for three reasons. First, students use social media often, and they are an important voter group in the democratic process. Second, UINSU students come from diverse academic backgrounds, so they bring varied perspectives when they interpret political information on social media. Third, UIN North Sumatra's academic environment is closely tied to religious and social values. This creates a distinct way of responding to candidates' political messages online. This choice will show how young voters at an Islamically oriented university use digital media and how that use shapes their preferences and critical awareness (Angela & Nisaa, 2025; Kusnadi et al., 2025).

Method

Research Approach

We used a qualitative approach and content analysis to examine how Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas shapes the political awareness of UINSU students. We chose this approach to understand how Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas shapes students' political awareness. We used content analysis to identify themes and understand the context behind each message. This approach helped us examine the campaign team's persuasive messages, including how they built a positive image and shared the candidate's vision and mission with the audience (Prayogi et al., 2026; Joniarta, 2024).

According to (Erfiana & Purnamasari, 2023), qualitative research helps us understand the meaning people or groups give to a social phenomenon. We explored this phenomenon through interviews, observation, and document analysis to obtain a complete picture of social reality. It focuses on context, meaning, and the experiences of participants in their natural setting.

According to Sumarno (2020), content analysis is a research technique used to understand human behavior indirectly through the analysis of the forms of communication it produces. This technique can be applied to many kinds of media, from textbooks and news reports to speeches, advertisements, and images. By examining these messages, we can identify their meanings and patterns. In this study, we used content analysis to trace the candidate's political story and public image through the visual and narrative elements in Instagram posts (Fadiyah & Simorangkir, 2021; Sunarwan & Surlia, 2021).

Data Collection Technique

We collected data through semi-structured interviews, observation, and review of Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas. We analyzed photos, videos, and infographics published during the period from July to November 2024. This period was chosen based on the stages of the 2024 Medan City Pilkada, starting from the announcement of the candidate pairs through voting in November 2024. This time range helped us describe the form and development of political content published during the Pilkada process. This approach is supported by the flexibility of the Instagram platform, which provides a rich multimodal dataset, allowing the researcher to extract not only visual elements but also the text narrative in captions, which are limited to 2,200 characters (Dubbelman et al., 2024). We then compared the three sources to strengthen the findings (Renz et al., 2018). The documents analyzed were processed through a systematic procedure to find clear meaning and support the interpretation of the findings (ARSLAN, 2025).

We conducted this research at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) and selected eight students through purposive sampling. The selection of informants was based on several criteria: students who actively use Instagram, who had seen or accessed Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas, and who came from the Faculty of Tarbiyah, Ushuluddin, Sharia, and Da'wah, representing several faculties at UINSU. We chose this approach to better understand students' experiences, views, and interpretations of the political content they encounter on social media. In-depth interviews were conducted to uncover the subjective experiences and feelings of students when interacting with the political messages presented by the candidate (Mudiani, 2023; Hidayat et al., 2022).

In addition, this purposive selection of informants aimed to obtain accurate data from individuals considered to have the best understanding of the research object and able to provide an in-depth perspective on the effectiveness of the political communication (Sartikasari et al., 2021). We then analyzed the data by reducing it, organizing it, and drawing conclusions to identify consistent themes and communication patterns (Iqbal & Purwaningwulan, 2023; Qudsi & Syamtar, 2020).

Data Analysis

We analyzed our data using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model. According to Miles and Huberman, analyzing data as we collected it helped us reflect on the information at hand, plan the next steps, clarify anything confusing, and understand the impact of the events we studied (Paré, 2004). They describe three main stages in qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. First, we reduced the data. This means we selected, grouped, and classified the results of the observations, interviews, and documentation according to Pilkada-related themes. We then presented the data in descriptive narratives and tables, making the findings easier to understand. Finally, we drew conclusions. We identified patterns in the findings, examined how the messages in the content related to informants' responses, and analyzed the role of that content in shaping students' political awareness. We checked the data throughout the study to make sure our interpretation of the political communication we examined was sound (Lestari & Rohimakumullah, 2022).

Results and Discussion

The Instagram account @ricowaas is the official account of Rico Tri Putra Bayu Waas. He has used this account as a means of public communication since serving as Deputy Chair of NasDem through his candidacy in the 2024 Medan City Pilkada. During the campaign, he used the account to share information about political activities, work programs, and interactions with the public. After he was elected and inaugurated as Mayor of Medan on 20 February 2025, the @ricowaas account remained active. It now shares information about government activities, public services, and other local government work. At the time this study was conducted, the

@ricowaas account had 51,200 followers and 2,310 posts, and it followed 2,003 accounts.



Figure 1. Rico Waas Instagram Account Profile

During the 2024 Medan City Pilkada campaign, the @ricowaas account regularly shared several types of content, including photos, short videos (Reels), infographics, documentation of field activities, and posts conveying its vision, mission, and work programs to the public. This variety of content leveraged Instagram's visual characteristics, allowing political information to be conveyed more simply, attractively, and in a way that was easy for users to understand. This shows how Instagram can support political communication. The combination of visuals and concise narrative made political messages more accessible to the audience and encouraged public interaction (Sastro, 2025). This strategy used interactive tools, such as comments and reactions, which allow the audience to engage directly in political dialogue with the candidate (Kurniawan & Widyatama, 2023; Widianoro, 2025).

Instagram Content Analysis

We next present the results of our analysis of @ricowaas uploads during the 2024 Medan City Pilkada campaign.

We examined how the @ricowaas account packaged its campaign messages through photos, short videos (Reels), and infographics. We used Eriyanto's approach to choose the unit of analysis, group the content, and interpret each upload (Eriyanto, 2011). The analysis

focused on content related to the political campaign, including the candidate's personal brand, political support, messages about the vision, mission, and work programs, interaction with the public, and calls to participate in the Pilkada. Using this approach, we examined how the AIDA model built the candidate's personal brand among young voters (Sastro et al., 2025).

What We Analyze	Category	Indicator	What We Want to Learn
Photos, videos (Reels), carousels, captions, and infographics posted on the @ricowaas Instagram account during the 2024 Medan City election (Pilkada) campaign	Candidate's Public Image	Shows the candidate's personality, leadership, daily activities, and closeness to the public	See how the candidate builds a public image
	Vision, Mission, and Work Program	Explains the vision, mission, political promises, flagship programs, and solutions to problems facing the city of Medan	See how the candidate shares political information with the public
	Interaction with the Public	Features visits to the community, dialogue, social, religious, and educational activities, and MSMEs (micro, small, and medium enterprises)	See how the candidate starts two-way conversations with residents
	Political Support	Shows support from political parties, community leaders, volunteers, organizations, and communities	Examine how the candidate builds public trust
	Call for Political Participation	Promotes calls to vote, Pilkada outreach, peaceful campaigning, and democracy education	See how the candidate encourages residents to take part in the election

Table 1. Categories of Content Analysis for Pilkada Content on the @ricowaas Instagram Account

We divided every post on the @ricowaas account into five main categories: personal branding, vision and work program, interaction with the public, political support, and calls for participation. We grouped these based on the theme and purpose of the message. This helped us see more clearly how the @ricowaas account delivered political messages during the 2024 Medan Pilkada. This matches earlier studies of political social media, which show that the consistent use of visual and interactive content is key to shaping perceptions and the candidate's self-image in the eyes of young voters (Elena, 2025).

We built these categories using Eriyanto (2011). These categories did more than sort the data: they helped us examine the campaign communication strategy used on the @ricowaas account during the 2024 Medan Pilkada campaign. This framework helped us understand the purpose of each post.

No	Category	Format	Count	Interpretation
1	Candidate Profile	Photos, Reels	56	This is the main content. It highlights Rico Waas's closeness with residents through social activities and field visits.
2	Interaction with the Public	Activity Posts	49	Shows direct communication with residents through dialogue and community activities.
3	Political Support	Support Statements	30	Shows support from political parties, volunteers, and community leaders.
4	Vision, Mission, and Work Program	Infographics, Carousel, Reels	15	Explains flagship programs, the vision for developing the city of Medan, and solutions to various urban problems.
5	Call for Political Participation	Posters, Reels	7	Invites residents to exercise their right to vote and participate peacefully in the <i>Pilkada</i> .

Table 2. Results of Content Analysis of Pilkada Content on the @ricowaas Instagram Account

Table 2 shows that personal branding is the largest category. This means the communication strategy on the @ricowaas Instagram account focuses more on building the candidate's image: someone simple, active, and close to the residents. Most of the uploads show documentation of the candidate's activities, such as exercising and chatting casually with residents, visiting various areas of Medan City, attending religious activities, engaging in dialogue with the community, and taking part in youth activities. This pattern shows that Instagram does more than share political information. It also helps the candidate build an emotional connection with the public by showing everyday activities.



Figure 2. Rico Waas Content Showing Personal Branding (Sunday Morning Car Free Day)

After personal branding, the interaction-with-the-public category comes second. Most uploads show the candidate talking with residents, visiting neighborhoods, traditional markets, schools, and houses of worship, or joining social activities. The account does more than share campaign activities; it also shows the candidate's closeness to the public. In political communication, this pattern is a participatory approach (Díaz et al., 2023). Through direct interaction with residents, the candidate seeks to build a closer relationship while also fostering public trust. The candidate's presence in various public spaces can also

shape the perception that he understands the conditions, needs, and problems faced by the community.



Political support is the largest category. These posts usually show endorsements from parties, community leaders, organizations, or local groups. The goal is simple: show who supports the candidate and build a sense of legitimacy and broad support. This is more than information. It strengthens the candidate's image and earns voters' trust.



Figure 4. Content on Political Support from Palito Volunteers

Posts about the vision, mission, work program, and political participation appear less often. Still, they play an important role in the @ricowaas account's strategy. These posts usually take the form of

infographics, short videos (Reels), or carousels that explain the campaign program. The account also calls on residents to vote. This means the @ricowaas account is used not only to promote the candidate, but also to teach residents about democracy.



Figures 5 and 6. Content Discussing the Work Program and Calls for Political Participation for Millennials and Gen Z

Overall, the analysis shows that the Instagram account @ricowaas relies on visual communication to convey its political message. Political

messages during the 2024 Medan City Pilkada period. The dominance of personal-branding content shows that political communication on social media does more than share a candidate's vision, mission, and work programs. It also builds the candidate's image through visuals, stories, and activity updates that help create a sense of closeness with the public. This finding aligns with the view of Eriyanto (2011) regarding the use of content analysis to observe message trends in a medium.

Through this analysis, we can understand how messages are conveyed, as well as see the communication strategies used by the communicator to achieve their goals. In the context of this study, this strategy is evident in the way the @ricowaas account crafts political content to make it more acceptable and to attract audience attention on social media. This pattern reflects contemporary political communication, where personal symbols and emotional connection help candidates build public trust and legitimacy online (Zahir et al., 2025). This strategy follows a national trend: social media, especially Instagram, now helps shape public perceptions and strengthen political figures' identities (Adhipratama, 2025; Pamungkas et al., 2024).

The Role of Pilkada Content on the Instagram Account @ricowaas in Shaping Political Awareness

Dominance of Personal Branding Content

Content analysis of the @ricowaas Pilkada posts shows that the account does more than convey political information. The posts also support a communication strategy that shapes students' understanding of the candidate during the 2024 Medan City Pilkada. Using photos, reels, infographics, carousels, and persuasive narratives, the account presented political messages in an appealing, easy-to-understand way. This approach reached Instagram users, especially students, who are among the platform's most active users. This type of content presentation shows that social media has now become a place for political communication that is more than just information. The way messages are packaged through visual elements and narrative shapes the audience's understanding, views, and interpretation of political reality on social media (Mhd. Harvinsyah R. H, 2026).

Safira, a student from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, reinforced this finding in an interview:

"In my opinion, the @ricowaas account makes it easier for me to get information about his profile, work programs, and various activities carried out during the campaign period. The information conveyed is also easier to understand because it is packaged in the *form of photos, short videos, and infographics*. Compared to just reading text, this kind of presentation makes it easier for me to understand the content of the message."

The key point is that Instagram's visual content helps students learn about politics (Amankwah & Mbatha, 2022). Visual content is more effective at capturing the audience's attention than lengthy text (Kárná, 2025).

We found that Content that builds a personal image dominates, while content about vision, mission, and work programs receives less attention. Their strategy is clear: focus on building an image. They regularly upload photos of activities with residents, field visits, and social actions, all designed to project a figure who is close to the people. This pattern of content presentation is one of the hallmarks of political communication in digital media, particularly Instagram, which relies on the power of visuals to build closeness with the audience. Compared to lengthy program explanations, content in the form of photos and videos more easily captures users' attention and is more quickly understood. Because of this, visual representation functions not only to convey information, but also to shape a positive impression and perception of the political figure among the public. This strategy helps the candidate build influence and present himself clearly in the digital space (Suryadi & Melisa, 2025). This shows that a social media campaign works best when candidates show a humane and empathetic side through messages that inform and connect with people (Nurshiva et al., 2025).

One of the informants, Humairah, a student from the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Studies, said:

"The content uploaded on the @ricowaas account quite influenced the way I view him as a candidate for Mayor. I saw that he was actively

going out into the field and interacting with the community. The content presentation was also quite appealing, with neatly presented photos and videos and easy-to-understand captions."

Rifa, a student from the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, felt the same way:

"From the start, the content I remember most from the @ricowaas account centered on his activities interacting with the community, as well as discussing and exchanging views on the development of Medan City."

How Political Awareness Forms: Naive and Critical Awareness

However, successful political content does more than capture attention; it can also spark political awareness (Indonesia et al., 2024). Here, we examine this process using Paulo Freire's concept of conscientização, which means learning to question power. Freire explains that there are two levels: naive consciousness and critical consciousness (Freire, 2008).

Naive consciousness means we accept information as it is without asking many questions. Critical consciousness, on the other hand, arises when we examine information in depth and consider the interests behind the message. Simply put, we do not just swallow information, but also assess and compare it before forming an attitude (Freire, 2008). So, what about the Instagram account @ricowaas? Its content has the potential to trigger both types of awareness described above. For some students, appealing visuals can trigger naive awareness. Their attention is drawn to the candidate's appearance or closeness, without probing into his vision or work program. In the end, politics is judged only by image, not substance. On the other hand, there are students who have reached critical awareness by seeing the narrative as a strategy to present the candidate as closer to the public (Siregar & Azhar, 2025). This shows that social media has two roles: it spreads messages widely and can shape public opinion (Efendi et al., 2024). This fits agenda-setting theory: by controlling the visual story, a candidate can shape which issues the audience sees as important (Salsabila et al., 2025).

"After seeing some of his content, I got the impression that he is a friendly person, close to the community, and serious about wanting to develop the city of Medan through the ideas and work programs he presented. His work programs were also conveyed briefly through

infographics, so I found it easier to understand even though I did not pay too much attention to the details," said Riska, a student from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training.

This finding is consistent with Dava Pratama Putra (2025), who noted how Instagram helps students get to know candidates. Here, the content of the @ricowaas account proved to be a genuine source of information for them.

However, the results of an interview with Ayu, a student from the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Studies, revealed another side. Some students began to show critical awareness. They did not swallow the content of the Instagram account @ricowaas at face value. Instead, they compared the information with other media, checked the track record, and distinguished between image-building and actual policy. This process shows that social media can become a digital public space. It helps students build political literacy by checking the candidate's story (Narendraswara & Aji, 2025) (Alya et al., 2025).

"It's a campaign, so of course it's not going to show anything bad. Especially on social media, which only shows the good and positive sides. I still look for information from other sources, such as online media, or watch his performance in the Pilkada debates with the other candidates," said Ayu.

This attitude proves that students are not merely passive viewers. They actively assess political messages using their digital literacy. This finding confirms that Instagram content does not automatically make students passive, but instead triggers a critical attitude (Sarkawi et al., 2025).

Ramadhan, a student from the Faculty of Sharia and Law, expressed a similar view:

"In my opinion, the social media accounts of regional head candidates are indeed created to convey information while also building a political image. Because of that, the content shown usually highlights more of the candidate's positive side. That's why we also need to check information from other sources, so that the judgment we make is more objective and does not depend on just one account or one point of view."

Students' political awareness does not simply appear on its own, even though they are often exposed to political content on social media. In line with Paulo Freire's thinking, critical awareness grows when people reflect on information instead of simply accepting it. They question it,

understand it, and examine the interests behind it (Wittebols, 2020) (Schilling & Grohs, 2024).

This skill helps students look past social media's visual appeal and examine the political message, so they do not get trapped in the account's single story (Dikarsa, 2021). This shows that critical literacy acts as a filter: it helps students examine messages from different points of view and spot bias in political misinformation (Farida, 2019; Sugara et al., 2026) (Albakry et al., 2026).

In this study, students showed this process by separating image-building content from information about a candidate's vision, development plans, and work program. In other words, students did not just look at how candidates appeared on social media. They also sought to understand the message before forming a judgment. This vigilance shows strong media literacy: students check information across sources to avoid bias in campaign narratives (Prasetyawan, 2020; Sulthan & Istiyanto, 2019).

Fatur, a student from the Faculty of Sharia and Law, offers a simple view of critical social media use:

"In my opinion, as a social media user, especially as a student, we do need to be more critical. Information on one account is not necessarily entirely true. Because of that, we need to compare it with information from other sources so that what we receive is truly valid and is not seen from only one point of view."

Lulu, a student from the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, agrees. For her, content on Instagram is merely an entry point for getting to know a candidate.

"For me, before judging a candidate, I still look for information from other sources. I usually check their track record, read their vision and mission, follow the results of the debates, and compare them with coverage from various media outlets. So, content on Instagram is not the only basis I use to form an opinion."

Students no longer accept information on social media uncritically as their sole reference. For them, content on Instagram plays more of a role as an initial step toward getting to know a candidate. They form judgments by comparing sources, evaluating messages, and considering candidates' track records and programs. But disinformation remains a

risk, especially because students are more likely to trust information that matches their political preferences (Nurrahmi & Syam, 2020).

Our research results show that Pilkada content on Instagram @ricowaas does not automatically shape students' political awareness. The relationship is not that simple. These posts give students a first way to meet the candidate, follow the Pilkada, and build political knowledge. However, the form of political awareness that emerges is determined not only by the intensity of exposure to the content, but also by each student's ability to reflect on, verify, and evaluate the information they receive. How students think and feel about this political content largely determines whether social media information becomes a rational political attitude (Utama, 2025). This is in line with the finding that although social media such as Instagram functions as a primary channel for the dissemination of electoral information, the effectiveness of its influence depends heavily on the audience's active engagement in filtering narratives that are sometimes contradictory (Weninggalih & Fuady, 2021).

If students focus only on visuals or image-building, they may form only a shallow understanding. Conversely, if they examine work programs and critique political narratives, they are building critical awareness in the style of Paulo Freire (Mahur et al., 2019). In other words, social media is not the sole determinant. It is merely a space that demands digital literacy, critical thinking skills, and deep reflection from students as users. The gap between what first-time voters see online and how well they understand politics shows why media literacy matters, given that the influence of social media is often more cognitive than deterministic in shaping electoral preferences (Siregar, 2024). Thus, students' active involvement in the information-verification process becomes the key factor in transforming social media consumption into substantial political literacy (Mustopa et al., 2024; Wilfi et al., 2025).

Conclusion

We found that Pilkada content on the Instagram account @ricowaas helped increase the political knowledge and awareness of UINSU students. The account used visuals to share the candidate's profile, work program, and campaign activities. This made it easier for students

to learn about the 2024 Medan City Pilkada. Most posts focused on the candidate's personal brand, but interviews showed that this content did not directly shape students' political preferences. From Paulo Freire's perspective (Robinson et al., 2021), we found different levels of political awareness among students. Some informants still showed the characteristics of naive awareness, focusing more on the visual aspects and the candidate's image as displayed on social media. However, most informants had shown critical awareness by comparing information from various sources, verifying the candidate's track record, and assessing the vision, mission, and work program before forming a political view. This finding shows that the Instagram account @ricowaas serves as a starting point for shaping students' political awareness. The awareness students develop depends on their digital literacy, critical thinking, and ability to reflect.

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