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The New Teacher of Ideas: A Study on Social Media, Political Influencers, and Generation Z

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Generation Z

by

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ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on members of Generation Z and where they learn about politics and receive political news. Different than previous generations, Generation Z receives news on social media more than on traditional media platforms (Murmuration, 2023). Politicians must quickly begin to understand how to engage and connect with the next generation of voters on these social media platforms. For these reasons, this study surveyed members of Generation Z at The University of Mississippi. Current University of Mississippi students are members of Generation Z and reflect common trends among this Generation, such as constant usage of social media. This research is important in helping political campaigns increase engagement among the youngest group of voters. A candidate or party who can increase participation among Generation Z could potentially win future elections.

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PREFACE

When examining the history of the United States, it is evident that political campaigning has drastically changed. Political ideologies, party values, communication mediums, and many other aspects of a political campaign have shifted over time. However, each candidate's overall goal has remained the same: to become the elected official in office. Whether running for a city council member or President of the United States, winning over voters is the primary purpose of a campaign.

As the next generation of voters begins to use their voice in American politics, politicians and campaigners begin to ask, "How will this generation change the future of political parties? How are candidates going to win over the voters of this next generation?"

To reach this group of individuals, it is first necessary to understand who the next generation is. Given the title Generation Z, members of this generation are typically born from 1997-2012 (Dimock, 2019). This generation views the social, economic, and cultural world around them as remarkably different from generations before. They do not know a world without the Internet; many grew up with it constantly at their fingertips. Their brains have been trained differently than previous generations, constantly processing large amounts of information thrown at them on social media (Weise, 2019).

Political campaigns must begin to understand this generation to appeal to them as voters. Research shows that social media is the most effective way to reach Generation Z (Weise, 2019). This generation is present on many platforms. However, each has its unique function and purpose for its users. Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok are a few of the most notable platforms used by this generation

(Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022). Some platforms are better for the spread of political news than others. For example, Twitter is commonly used in political campaigns because of the app's feature to "serve the public conversation" (Campaigning on Twitter Handbook, 2023). Furthermore, certain apps reach different target audiences better than others. For example, research shows that 76% of Generation Z members are present on Instagram (Roberts, 2023). This makes this platform great for targeting a Generation Z audience.

To reach this generation, campaigns must understand how to meet Generation Z where they are and connect with them. This study is a deep dive into social media platforms and their effectiveness in spreading political information to Generation Z college students for political campaigns.

CHAPTER I

Reaching Future Voters

The overarching question on a political campaign is if you have a big pool of

voters, how do you reach them? Overall, it is not just what you tell them but how they

will consume it. Political campaigns can give a great message, but the message will

quickly be lost if it is not in a medium that the target audience consumes, not in a

medium that they trust, or a medium of a different audience.

Throughout history, politicians have always had to figure out how to reach voters.

Whether through newspapers, radio, television, or social media, politicians have always

had to meet the voters where they are. The remainder of the thesis will focus on how

politicians must reach the youngest generation of voters, Generation Z. It is important for

politicians to keep up with and be ahead of the times. If a politician can appeal to a

younger audience, they can win their votes in the future.

One day, in the not-too-distant future, this audience that mindlessly scrolls

through TikTok will become a political party's biggest supporters. How will political

campaigns now shape the ideologies of these blooming generations to ensure their

parties' success in the future when these generations become the bulk of their voting

population? Now more than ever, politicians must understand how to take advantage of

social media to gain the trust and support of Generation Z.

Who is Generation Z?

Generation Z is known to be born during the mid to late 90s and early 2010s. This

generation comes behind millennials and is significantly different from their

predecessors. A few broad characteristics of Generation Z include but are not limited to; do not want to be labeled, connectivity with various groups, and is digitally native (Weise, 2019). These are some important traits to understand as someone in politics trying to connect with Generation Z.

Many monumental events occurred during this generation's early childhood. It is important to note Generation Z was born right on the brink of 9/11. They grew up in a post-9/11 world and understood the effects of the dangerous world they live in. They were young during the great recession (2008) and possibly saw their parents or some older family member under significant financial burden. This affects how they view their finances as they start earning their own money (Weise, 2019).

Most notably, Generation Z is the first group to be raised in the truly digital age. Instabrain points out, "Your future customers have never known a world without search, social, and smartphones— and they are not just influencing future products; they are changing the game for just about every generation and industry today" (Weise, 2019, 8). This idea directly correlates to trends being set in politics. Future voters are members of this generation and are beginning to influence how politicians conduct political campaigning.

With constant Internet and social media access, Generation Z knows when someone is trying to get their attention. The continuous information overload has made it natural for Generation Z to weed out what they do not want to see. Politicians must create an authentic and engaging brand to connect with Generation Z. Advertising to Generation Z may be difficult because of the large amount of information they have to process.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the target audience and adapt to best reach them where they are on social media.

Each generation uses social media for different purposes. Generation Z uses social media drastically differently than older generations, such as Millennials. Millennials typically use social platforms for sharing things about their personal life, but Generation Z primarily uses social media for content consumption (Weise, 2019). Each platform offers these users different versions of content to contribute to their education, inspiration, or entertainment. With never-ending categories of content, Generation Z is constantly organizing and grouping. Studies show that many have multiple Instagram accounts, each for a different content category. They use social media to create their brand carefully, taking this very seriously, only sharing content that aligns with their values. As a politician, it is crucial to understand how Generation Z uses each platform and try to reach them appropriately where they are.

Capturing the attention of Generation Z requires several practices that include putting values first, not participating in performative activism, and speaking their language (Hirose, 2022). First, Generation Z cares more about this company itself than the product or service being sold to them. They are more likely to engage with a business that align with their values (Hirose, 2022). This goes the same for politicians. Members of Generation Z look at the values of a politician as a whole, not just the values they are promoting in their campaign. This ties in with not participating in performative activism. Members of Generation Z will hold politicians to their promises, and if they do not uphold, Generation Z is quick to turn. Research shows that "Gen Zers don't hesitate to cancel brands when they sense a shallow veneer" (Hirose, 2022). The same goes for

politicians. This generation is quick to call someone out for not aligning their actions with their promises. Lastly, it is important to speak to Generation Z in their language, but not in a way that over does it. Being able to observe Generation Z, understand them, and speak to them in a way they relate to is a difficult task, but vital for the success in winning over future Generation Z voters.

Understanding the over-arching cultural, social, and economic world that Generation Z grew up in is crucial to connecting with this group. Even if they are not currently a political party's largest target group of voters, soon they will make up most of the population. Generation Z is essential for individuals to understand because — "your actions today — how well you are getting to know your future customers — could mean the difference between future success or failure" (Weise, 2019, 12). Politicians and political parties must stay one step ahead and learn this generation's social and political behavior.

History of Mass Media

A brief history of traditional media proves that humans have always strived for improvement and advancements in media throughout history. New and updated versions of media have always found their way into society, leaving us always living in an ever-changing world. (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2008). "American presidents have had to calculate how to deal with the news media and, as communications technologies and outlets evolved and expanded, with the broader media overall" (Douglas, 2015). It is essential to understand how the addition of different mass media in

society affects the spread of information, ultimately impacting and becoming a massive part of a campaign and election results.

To understand where media in society is today, it is first essential to understand the overall history of media. Many forms of traditional media shaped American politics long before the Internet and social media. Traditional media is defined as "any form of mass communication available before the advent of digital media" (Johnson, 2015). Traditional media includes newspapers, radio, television, books, or magazines (Johnson, 2015).

In early America, newspapers were a way to spread information and news in a community, and they quickly became crucial to society's success at that time. In politics, they were a way for politicians, journalists, and active members of society to spread important information to the communities around them.

Political papers were a specific type of newspaper issue that covered politics and government. Early examples (1800-1860) of these publications included the *Washington Globe,* the *Washington National Intelligencer,* the *New York Evening Post,* the *Baltimore Republican,* the *Philadelphia North American,* and the *Ohio Statesman*. These newspapers were used by elected officials, journalists, and political parties to spread ideas and opinions to the public (Ross, 2011). For instance, the *Washington Globe* was a political paper during the administration of Andrew Jackson's presidency. It reported on the activities of Congress, gave overviews of election results, and noticed presidential appointments. This newspaper was a source of information on the Jackson presidency, the Democratic Party, and the federal government (Ross, 2011).

Next came the invention of the radio, a new and improved way of spreading information in society. With the creation of radio, people could listen to the news being broadcasted. This led to a faster, more efficient way to spread information and communication from politicians and journalists to the people.

Radio first began being used in the 1920s. The first national radio broadcast of an inauguration occurred on March 4th, 1925, for President Calvin Coolidge. More than 22,000,000 households tuned in for the broadcast (Radio and Congress). This was a record-breaking number of individuals who could listen to a presidential inauguration live. The invention of the radio paved the way for the future expansion of mass media.

The invention of the television followed, now creating a visual communication tool between news broadcasters and the public. Politicians had to quickly adapt to this new technology (Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2022). They now had to present themselves and their policies to voters "through celluloid images rather than newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, or local party structures" (Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2022). In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower made history with his televised campaign. He was commonly referred to as the first "Primetime President" (Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2022). The election of 1952 was the initial presidential campaign to use television to communicate messages to voters. Successive presidential elections continued to build on using television in a campaign.

The 1960 presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon was notorious for shaping the landscape of politics on television. Both candidates appeared on television to debate before 70 million viewers. John F. Kennedy is a prime example of a politician adjusting to the new media. When the televised debate occurred, Kennedy was

the clear frontrunner to those who watched on television. He was calm, collected, and looked great on camera. Nixon, however, was paler and shakier on camera. His body language did not send the same message as Kennedy's did to viewers. People who listened to the debate on the radio vouched that it was an equal outcome, but those who watched it on television argued that Kennedy was the clear frontrunner. This debate was one of the first true examples of how a politician had to successfully portray their image to the public, not just their opinions and beliefs (NCC Staff, 2017).

President John F Kennedy writes about how candidates must create an image of themselves for the public by using television. He writes: "Honesty, vigor, compassion, intelligence—the presence or lack of these or other qualities make up what is called the candidate's 'image,' [...] My own conviction is that these images or impressions are likely to be uncannily correct. But in the wrong hands, television could be used for "manipulation, exploitation and gimmicks [...] It can be abused by demigods, by appeals to emotions and prejudice and ignorance" (Bomboy, 2018). His words remain relevant to today's world of media.

As this brief history of traditional mass media has demonstrated, politicians have had to adapt to the ever-changing landscape of media constantly. Changes occur fast, and politicians are often forced to keep up or be left behind.

A new type of media was introduced in the 2000s with the invention of the Internet. Digital media are "encoded in digital format, typically to be transmitted and consumed on electronic devices, such as computers and smartphones" (What is Digital Media, 2020).

Digital media consist of various mediums such as emails, video recordings, podcasts, electronic books, blogs, and instant messaging. Most forms of digital media can fit into one of these subgroups: Audio, video, social media, advertising, and news/literature/more (What is Digital Media, 2020).

Access to the internet, accompanied by the creation of computers and smartphones, allowed for digital media to spread rapidly throughout society. Digital media brought a technological revolution to the media industry. It changed the entire landscape for journalism, entertainment, politics, publishing, television, and many more industries.

Changes in Mass Media

The study The Influence and Effects of Mass Media, conducted by Denis McQuail, points out, "mass media are highly diverse in content and in forms of organization and include a very wide range of activities which could have effects on society." This study points out that mass media can have diverse effects on an individual, a group of people, an institution, society, and culture. Although mass media has different levels of influence over each group, it can be proven that it has had an overall effect throughout history (McQuail, 1983).

History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia, published in 1999, separates mass media into two simple divisions: informational and entertainment media. Information media comes from journalists and news outlets. They use media to spread information and news to the public. Entertainment media are media the public use

for entertainment. Information and entertainment crossover on most traditional forms of media (Cassel, 1999).

Many people use the radio for listening to music while also tuning into news outlets. Television is used to watch motion pictures for entertainment, but also to watch news segments. Books are used for fictional reading aside learning and obtaining information. Nearly all forms of media are functional in both information and education, depending on how the user consumes them.

When this encyclopedia was published in 1999, most informational media mainly came directly from journalists. Journalists refer to themselves as the "fourth estate," meaning they come next in line after politicians in operating American society. Journalists' responsibility is to gather information and bring that news to the people. This allows journalists to influence the public's political, economic, and social lives.

History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia discusses how as media outlets have grown in reach, worries arise as people question the accuracy of journalists' message (Cassel, 1999). This worry has grown even stronger with the introduction of digital media. This new form of digital media has new levels of reach, causing many to question the authority the media might have.

Now more than ever, the two media divisions, entertainment, and information, tend to overlap in digital mass media. One user may use the medium for entertainment; another may use it for information. As time has progressed, the blurred line between using media for entertainment or information is no longer present. This is because the modern consumer demands it. With attention span shortening overtime, consumers demand information to be delivered in a more entertainment fashion.

This trend is further explained by the uses and gratification theory. This theory explains that people will continue to use something if it continues to satisfy their wants and needs. If consumers are to continue to use social media, it has to satisfy their gratification needs by providing entertainment (Gordon, 2022).

Another prominent cause of why there is a blurred line between entertainment and news reporting is that people often confuse opinion for fact. A Pew Research study states, "in a fast-paced and complex information environment, news consumers must make rapid-fire judgments about how to internalize news-related statements – statements that often come in snippets and through pathways that provide little context" (Mitchell, Gottfriend, Barthel, & Sumida, 2018)

In the past, consuming news was more straightforward. News outlets were more of a one-way street: journalists delivering their message to the public. Traditional mass media, like newspapers, radio, and TV, provided a better distinction between fact and opinion. Opinion was typically presented as an editorial, op-ed, and commentary. This made it distinguishable from a factual report because viewers, readers, or listeners were being told this information was opinionated (Mitchell, Gottfriend, Barthel, & Sumida, 2018). Digital media have exacerbated the blurred line between fact and opinion. Digital media allow for engagement from all users.

Therefore, politicians need to understand the how the new age of digital media impacts voters. Politicians must understand how information is being spread on digital platforms, how voters comprehend what information is factual and what is opinionated, and how this information is shaping their political views.

CHAPTER II

Social Media

This study will specifically dive deeper into the realm of social media within digital media. Social media are "interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks" (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

Social media have become crucial in society over the past decade. It is commonly used among all generations to communicate with each other, share information, and receive news. Some of the most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter. These are the leading platforms discussed in this study based on research that these platforms are the most common among Generation Z (Roberts, 2023). Each platform looks different and serves various purposes for its users. However, there are some common features among the platforms.

First, each platform is considered a Web 2.0 Internet-based application. This term was created to "describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan, 2009). This Web 2.0 classification was created in 2004, referring to the newly created idea where users created and shared content instead of publishers like in the past. User-generated content is another common aspect of social media platforms. On each of the popular platforms, individuals can create and share content themselves. This includes photos, videos, comments, likes, shares, retweets, and many other forms of content. User-generated

content is the "lifeblood" of social media and keeps the platforms relevant and enticing to

users (Kaplan, 2009). Each platform commonly uses networking and social connections.

Each platform also has some sort of followers and following setting. This helps users

create a network on each site to their liking. Some sites' networking dynamics differ from

others but overall have similar concepts of the idea that users can choose the accounts

they follow and filter the content they see on the platform.

Facebook is a social media platform launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. The

app transformed the social media and social networking industry. Initially, Facebook was

founded to be a networking site for college students. Users could only access the site on a

personal computer and could only register with a ".edu" email address. Today, Facebook

can be accessed on tablets and smartphones and is open to anyone. Users create a profile

on the app and can connect with or follow other accounts. Post types can include photos,

videos, text, stories, and multimedia.

Facebook is extremely popular across the world, ranking as the top social

platform in 2022 with 2.9 billion users (Lua, 2023). A chart of the demographics (age,

gender) is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stats on Facebook Demographics
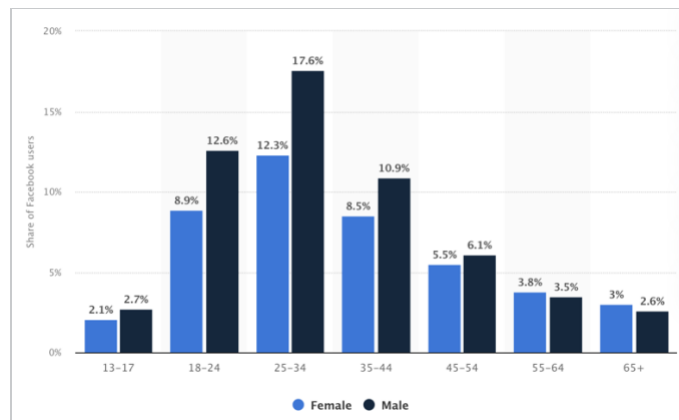
Instagram is a popular social media platform owned by Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook. It is primarily used for photo and video sharing. Users can post pictures and videos to their page, comment or like photos of another page, and share other pages' posts on their own page. Posts can be organized by including tags, hashtags, and geographical locations. These organizational aspects of the app help users personalize their feed to what content they want to see. Overall, Instagram can be defined as a massive melting pot for all sorts of social networking on one platform. (Ruby, 2023)

As of April 2022, roughly one billion people actively use Instagram worldwide. 123 million users come from the United States. Shown in Table 1, 8.9% are ages 13-17. 30.2% are ages 18-24. 31.7% are ages 25-34. 15.8% are ages 35-44. 7.8% are ages 45-54. 3.7% are ages 55-64. 2.1% are ages 65+ (Pew Research, 2021).

Table 1. Ages of Frequent Instagram Users

Age of Users	%
13-17	8.9%
18-24	30.2%
25-34	31.7%
35-44	15.8%
45-54	7.8%
55-64	3.7%
65+	2.1%

Twitter is another American-based social media platform launched in 2006. It is considered a "microblogging" and social networking site. Posts on the site are referred to as "Tweets," and sharing on the site is called "Retweeting." Users can create posts with text, photos, videos, or links. Twitter is primarily known for users using text post-types limited to 280 characters. Users can create an account and choose whether it is private or

public. They can select which other accounts they want to follow. Journalists and politicians commonly use Twitter. The text feature allows for news and stories to be shared. Users can add links to their posts that lead followers to another site, such as a news organization's website, to read the full story. A news story posted on Twitter could look similar to Figure 2 below. This tweet consists of a short headline and includes a link to read the full story on The Wall Street Journal.

Figure 2. Wall Street Journal Twitter Post

Snapchat is another social media platform for sharing photos, videos, and messages. The platform was released in 2011. Initially, the app only allowed users to send direct messages to other users. These messages were only available to be viewed for a short period. The app evolved and now features "Stories." "Stories" allow users to post photos or videos for their followers for a period of 24 hours. Snapchat is primarily popular among users ages 18-24 and is typically used as more of a communication platform. Research shows that "according to U.S. teenagers in fall 2020, Snapchat is the most important social network of their generation, ahead of photo sharing competitor

Instagram and other networks such as Twitter or Facebook. Overall, 48 percent of U.S. internet users aged 15 to 25 years were reportedly using Snapchat, the highest usage reach among any age group" (Dixon, 2023).

YouTube is an online video sharing platform. YouTube was founded in 2005 and is currently owned by Alphabet Inc. YouTube now has more than 2.5 billion monthly users. Users can watch videos about almost anything they want on the site. Video categories include music videos, news segments, movie trailers, documentaries, "how-to" videos, and much more. Most content is created by users of the site along with corporate sponsors. Many companies use the site for advertising and reaching a large audience or a specific niche audience.

TikTok is the most recent addition to the popular social platform group. TikTok is a short video sharing app owned by Chinese tech company ByteDance. It has become increasingly popular in a short period of time. Launched internationally in 2017, TikTok quickly took over the social media platform market for younger users. Figure 3 outlines the age demographics of TikTok users in the US. Approximately 60% of TikTok users are also members of Generation Z (Muliadi, 2022).

Figure 3. Stats on TikTok Demographics
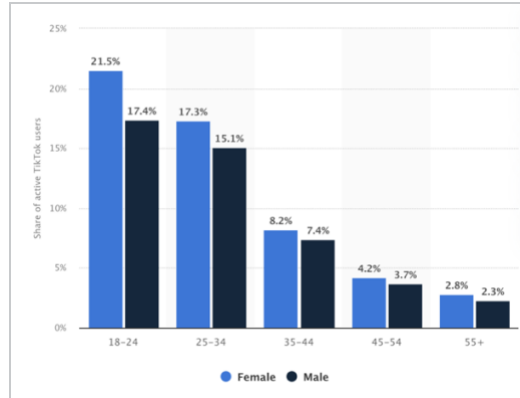
TikTok is becoming known as the platform for Generation Z, just as Facebook

was for Millennials (Willens, 2023). The platform was traditionally known for funny

videos or dances along to trending songs. However, in recent years, the platform has

become a hub for the spread of information in society. Stories surrounding issues such as

Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, Presidential elections, and more

have surfaced on the app and been shared by millions on the platform (Newman, 2022).

Exposure on these issues is reaching new audiences in mediums that they typically would

not be exposed to news coverage, specifically reaching members of Generation Z. News

on this platform is generated by influencers, activists, or the general public, rather than

journalists (Newman, 2022).

The New Teacher of Ideas

Throughout history, places to learn beliefs, such as religious or political, are from

one's parents, family members, schools, church, etc. These connections, in schools,

church, extended family, etc., are what shape and form children's foundational beliefs that

usually tend to stick with them throughout their lives. Today, there is a whole new realm

of influence on people's beliefs. Instead of their beliefs coming from these groups in their community, these beliefs are now being taught and learned through social media. COVID-19 exacerbated this trend, as everyone was removed from external connection and isolated to solely digital connection for a significant period (Goodwin & Woolley, 2021). This leads people to online mediums, such as social media, to interact with others in their community or outside. People began to learn many things on social media, notably their political beliefs.

This creates a massive shift in societal learning because, in the past, individuals grew up in similar neighborhoods, demographic groups, cultural groups, and economic levels. They were more easily shaped to believe things that aligned with their upbringing. However, younger generations now have access to anything they want on the internet. These individuals can catch a glimpse into the lives of people from all cultures, demographics, economic levels, etc., through the eyes of social media. This may cause their political beliefs to shift over time away from their close circle, such as their school or family, to be broader, seeing more perspectives than just those of the life they were born into. Instabrain points out that a member of Generation Z in America potentially has more in common with a member of Generation Z from Europe than they do with a Baby Boomer in their own country. As international connectivity increases with social media, younger generations are able to have a more global perspective on politics.

Social media are a new teacher of ideas, beliefs, and political ideologies (Weise, 2019). When social media were first introduced, people assumed the potential power to help advertise campaigns. Still, nobody could comprehend its full potential of shaping the political ideologies of nearly entire generations. Political parties must realize the

importance of teaching ideas at a young age through social media. Beginning this strategy now could change the complete outcome for the political party in 20-30 years.

Older voters did not grow up with the constant connection the younger generations have now. How will political campaigns now shape the ideologies of these blooming generations to ensure their parties' success in the future when these generations become the bulk of their voting population?

Influencers

Generation Z is not interested in basic Hollywood celebrities, unlike previous generations. They know the large amounts of money these celebrities gain to promote something and do not feel a personal connection with these unreachable idols. They look up to obtainable people, a group called influencers. For a generation craving authenticity, these influencers can engage with these audiences to help them feel meaningful and inspired. Politicians should study these influencers, specifically micro-influencers, and nano-influencers, to learn how to better engage with their Generation Z audience. Engaging with consumers using many smaller influencers rather than 1 or 2 macro-influencers is more effective (Weise, 2019).

Who is an influencer? Influencers are public figures who have the potential to influence individuals and society. Influencers are not a new phenomenon. They have existed in human society forever. For example, the Royal Family has always influenced British culture and everyday lifestyle. Old Hollywood stars, such as Marylin Monroe, would also be considered an influencer. She influenced women and the culture during her time. (Yec, 2022)

One of the most famous "influencer" marketing campaigns is Coca-Cola's Christmas campaign in the 1930s. During the Great Depression, Coca-Cola depicted Santa Claus in an advertisement drinking their product. The happy character of Santa Claus had a tremendous impact on society and resulted in the brand Coca-Cola being associated with Christmas in the years to follow (Campbell, 2019). This campaign is an example of the lasting power of influencer marketing. The right influencer to represent a brand can forever impact consumers.

This concept carries over to the influencers today. In the past, there were fewer influencers, and each one had a more considerable impact on society overall. Today, however, influencers are a vast population group and can influence either very large or very small groups of individuals. The change influencers have had over time is considered the "fundamental shift from one-to-many to many-to-many media communication" (Riedl, Schwemmer, Ziewiecki, & Ross, 2021). Social media have given individuals a platform to shape themselves into influencers (Yec, 2022). Being an influencer has become a full-time job for some individuals, and "According to *Business Insider's* forecast, 67.9% of U.S. marketers from companies with 100 or more employees will use influencer marketing in 2021, up from 62.3% in 2020. In 2022, that figure will rise to 72.5%." (Yec, 2022)

Most influencers have a specific niche audience. Some popular examples include fashion, cooking, politics, makeup, history, fitness, and many more groups. Some influencers can have different niches in their content, but many specialize in a specific one.

Influencers can be classified by their following size. Mega-influencers are classified as having more than 1 million followers. They are often "more famous than influential." They have a diverse audience and distant, less personal relationships. An example of a mega-influencer would be Kim Kardashian. A macro-influencer is known to have 100,000 to 1 million followers. A micro-influencer typically has a following of 1,000 to 100,000 followers. Some define micro-influencers as having 10,000-50,000 followers. They target a smaller, "niche" audience. Micro-influencers tend to have higher rates of authentic engagement. They can form more significant and personal relationships with their audience. They have a more "uniform" audience relating to a similar niche market. Lastly, a nano-influencer is known to have less than 1,000 followers. They typically influence within their smaller community. Examples of nano-influencers would be a local pastor, local government official, etc. (Geyser, 2022)

Research shows that Generation Z members prefer influencers because "they produce content and information in a very entertaining way and provide interesting content in a more personal setting" (Hirose, 2022). This user-generated content on social media has grown drastically in the past few years. In the same way that technology grew rapidly in the early 2000s and took over society, influencers are on track to do the same (Gagliese, 2022). Now more than ever, politicians must understand the reach of influencers and how they can benefit future election outcomes.

Political Influencers

       Political influencers are a specific group of influencers who discuss politics on their platforms. Political influencers can range from a following of 1,000 people to a following of 1 million people (Goodwin & Woolley, 2021). These influencers discuss relevant topics on politics and elections, typically encouraging their followers to agree with their points or participate in an action (Goodwin & Woolley, 2021). Political influencers have become increasingly popular in the most recent elections.

       Forbes points out how to identify political influencers based on their **reach** and **niche**. Reach focuses on the influencer's overall follower count and engagement from followers. It is crucial to understand who the influencer interacts with on each of their platforms. Second, engagement focuses on how the followers engage with the influencer's content. This includes likes, comments, shares, and more. Social media analytical tools can identify this sort of data. It can be further explained that "Reach helps brands target a wide audience base that believes in the influencer, while niche can be leveraged for special subject-matter-related strategies." (Yec, 2022).

       Political social media influencers have both a specific reach and a niche. Political influencers' niche targets users who are interested in politics. Political influencers have been around throughout history. For example, journalists and news anchors can be considered political influencers. They discuss politics and spread their opinions to the public. Social media have completely changed the landscape of political influencers. Now, anyone can publicize their political views and spread them to their followers and the public. Political influencers on social media have now "taken their place" next to journalists on the platforms, spreading their opinions on politics to sometimes the same

size, if not larger, audience. Political influencers are considered to have horizontal communication with their peers, rather than vertical communication, such as the relationship with journalists or politicians.

It is crucial to find the right influencers when spreading information regarding politics. One of the quickest ways to lose Generation Z's attention and respect for your campaign is to market to them in ways that do not fit their agenda. (Weise, 2019).

Current Examples of TikTok Politics, Gen Z for Change

Gen-Z for Change is a "collective group of Gen-Z activists that leverage the power of social media to drive progressive change" (Gen-Z for Change). They focus on a wide variety of political priorities, including Voting Rights, LGBTQ+ Rights, Gun Safety, Immigration, Racial Justice, Climate Justice, and more. Gen-Z for Change refers to themselves as "the place where the creator economy and progressive politics intersect on social media" (Gen-Z for Change). This group of activists is 100% led by members of Generation Z.

Gen-Z for Change currently has 1.6 million followers on TikTok, 75.3K followers on Twitter, 64K followers on Instagram, and 2.7K followers on Facebook. These numbers further prove which platforms members of Generation Z are going to learn about politics. TikTok has become a foundation for these influencers to spread their messages to members of their own generation.

The full potential of the influence these social media creators has over other members of their generation was noticed when President Biden called a White House briefing with 30 political influencers from TikTok. The briefing focused on the United

States strategy in the time of the war in Ukraine. Millions of Americans used TikTok as a source of information for the war. Many citizens of Ukraine turned to the app to document what was occurring in real-time. One Gen-Z TikTok creator, Kahlil Greene, states that "People in my generation get all our information from TikTok. It's the first place we're searching up new topics and learning about things" (Lorenz, 2022).

This new trend of using TikTok as a place to search for information became apparent to the Biden administration. In order to strategically prevent the spread of misinformation on the app, the Biden administration turned to the influencers who are reporting the information to the public on TikTok. Teddy Goff, founder of Precision Strategies consulting firm states that "The reach of a piece in a traditional news outlet is a fraction of what a big TikToker gets" (Lorenz, 2022). Many members of government are beginning to realize the potential reach of TikTok and how it is swaying public opinion, particularly among members of Generation Z.

Citizen Journalism

All social media platforms, most recently and notably TikTok, give way to the potential for citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is defined as "journalism that is conducted by people who are not professional journalists but who disseminate information using Web sites, blogs, and social media" (Albarado, 2018).

Valeria Shashenok, a young girl living in Ukraine, is one example of a citizen journalist. Shashenok was an ordinary 20-year-old girl who frequently shared videos of her travels and daily life experiences on her TikTok page. However, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Shashenok's page took a drastic turn. Overnight, she became a

citizen journalist. Her page allowed viewers a glimpse into the lives of the citizens living in Ukraine. Shashenok explains, "I feel like it's my mission to show people how it looks in real life. That it's real life, and I'm here" (Sung, 2022).

Many people call the Russian/Ukraine war the world's "first TikTok war" (Chayka, 2022). Many videos, specifically Shashenok's, incorporate a sense of dark humor while documenting real-life events. Shashenok's top video, viewed 51.5 million times, is titled "My typical day in a bomb shelter." Through this quick, 30-second clip, Shashenok shows viewers her life as a young girl living in Ukraine. She adds a familiar sound used by many TikTokers in the background of her video to lighten the mood and add her sense of humor about the situation. *The New Yorker* refers to these sorts of videos as "Internet jokes and deadly serious documents at the same time" (Chayka, 2022). Images below highlight some of the scenes documented in her video.

Figure 4. Photo Examples of Valeria Shashenok's TikTok

Valeria Shashenok is one of the thousands of citizens in Ukraine sharing content online and displaying their experiences during the invasion. She is also among the

millions who classify as a citizen journalist, documenting historical events in real-time. These moments are shown directly by the people experiencing the moment rather than journalists reporting on a story.

Citizen journalists have sprung up all over social media platforms. While prominent Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists will always be part of the media landscape, thousands of citizen journalists can post their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs daily in the digital world and share them with their peers. Any member of the public, whether a journalist or not, can share information as if they were a journalist. Now more than ever, society must learn to understand and navigate the digital world for the years to come.

Reach of Social Media vs. Traditional Media

Citizen journalism opens a new realm for the reach of news stories on social media versus traditional media. The circulation numbers of the most prominent papers and cable companies compared to the numbers of people on social media show drastic differences.

Pew Research notes that "the estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (print and digital combined) in 2020 was 24.3 million for weekday and 25.8 million for Sunday" (Pew Research, 2021). The total U.S. daily newspaper circulation between all of the papers in the country is half of the 51.5 million views Valeria Shashenok received on one 30-second TikTok video.

In the 2021-2022 season, *ABC World News Tonight* received 8.15 M viewers, *NBC Nightly News* received 6.87 M viewers, and *CBS Evening News* received 4.94 M viewers (Johnson, 2022). A Pew Research study shows viewer data from three top news

outlets, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. In 2020, the average number of TV's tuning into news programming during the prime news time slot for CNN was 1,803,782. For Fox News it was 3,082,961. For MSNBC it was 1,597,577 (Pew Research, 2021). Again, Valeria Shashenok received 51.1 million views on one 30-second TikTok video. However, not all TikTok videos go viral like Valeria Shashenok's did. Although this situation is not the "norm" in all circumstances, it shows the power of TikTok to potentially reach/influence. It is not uncommon for a short video on the app to receive one million or more views.

Pew Research study shows that more than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices (Shearer, 2021). Figure 5 shows the comparison between traditional media sources such as print, radio, and television compared to digital media sources such as smartphones, computers, or tablets. Furthermore, around half of Americans prefer their news from a digital source rather than television, radio, or print. Figure 5 shows data from Pew Research (Shearer, 2021).

Figure 5. Pew Research Data on Americans getting news on digital devices

Large majority of Americans get news on digital devices

% of U.S. adults who get news ____ from ...

Often ■ Sometimes

			NET
A smartphone, computer or tablet	60%	26%	**86%**
Television	40	28	**68**
Radio	16	34	**50**
Print publications	10	22	**32**

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

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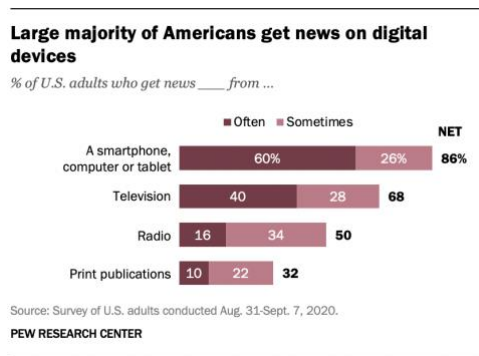
Figure 6. Pew Research Data on Americans who prefer digital devices over traditional

Roughly half of Americans prefer to get news on a digital platform; about a third prefer TV

% of U.S. adults who prefer ____ for getting news

Digital platforms	52%
Television	35
Radio	7
Print publications	5

Note: Digital platforms includes respondents who said they prefer news websites or apps, social media, search, or podcasts.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

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In this Pew Research study, conducted in 2021, 42% of respondents ages 18-29 were more likely to get their news from social media. This data further proves that younger generation are present on these social media platforms to consume news.

CHAPTER III

To acquire data to understand where members of the University of Mississippi receive their political news, I conducted a survey. All survey questions are included in the Appendix.

A survey was written to fit the specific audience and perspective of research. Conducting interviews was not considered as an option due to time constraints. All questions are objective and able to be asked through a survey method. The goal was to reach a broad pool of respondents by sending a survey to the entire population on campus.

This survey was administered through Qualtrics in September 2022 and sent out to the University of Mississippi campus. Approval was obtained from the IRB at the University of Mississippi. For the survey, I obtained informed consent, basic demographic (e.g. classification at the university, age, gender, ethnicity, and state or country they consider home), and political (e.g. partisanship, ideology, voting behavior) information.

Initially, the survey was intended to reach a larger population. Due to money, time, and reach constraints, it was determined that the effective strategy was to focus solely on members at the University of Mississippi. This population was accessed by email.

Questions, Explanations

The survey began by asking respondents their classification at the university, age, gender, ethnicity, and state or country they consider home (Q.1-5). These questions were asked to receive information on respondents' demographics. The purpose of these

questions was to reveal if age, gender, ethnicity, or place they consider home influences respondents' answers about their political ideology, where they receive their news, or their views on social media.

The next portion of the survey asked respondents to describe their political ideology and where they receive their political news regularly (Q.6,7). These questions aimed to identify which political party respondents identify with and if it has relationship to which mass media they receive their political news. Mass media options included were newspapers, television, radio, social media, and other.

Next, the survey moved on to have respondents select specific news outlets they receive political news from regularly (Q.9). Options included Fox News, NPR, CNN, MSNBC, New York Times, OAN, Newsmax, Washington Post, Local TV, CBS, ABC, NBC, Redditt, and other. The news outlets listed as options are known to be the most popular outlets overall among a variety of ages (Grieco, 2020).

The next portion of the survey focused on specifically social media. Respondents were asked to identify how often they check their favorite social media sites per day (Q.10). This question aimed to gauge how frequently users are accessing these social media platforms.

Respondents were then asked to choose what social media platforms they are most exposed to politics or world events (Q.11). Now that respondents identified which platforms they use and which mass media they get news from, respondents selected which specific platform they get the most news and world events from if they use social media. This question differentiates between which platforms respondents are using for entertainment and which platforms they are using for new consumption.

The next portion of the survey focused on political influencers. Respondents were asked if they intentionally follow any influencers who would be considered political influencers (Q.11). The survey asked respondents how many political influencers they follow, with options including 1-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10+, or prefer not to say.

Respondents were then asked to give names of the political influencers they follow (Q.12). This question was an open-ended question and allows respondents to type in the names of any political influencers they follow. This question was designed to see if several of the same political influencers' names are given. It was also included to discover any new political influencers to research their political influence platform.

The following segment of the survey asked respondents to express their views on whether social media has a positive or negative effects on the way things are going in the country (Q.14-16). The respondents first select whether they believe social media has a positive effect on the way things are going in this country or a negative one. Once they chose their stance, they were shown a series of statements that explain reasoning.

If a respondent selected the positive choice, they were directed to a list of options on why they believe social media has positive effects on the way things are going in the country. Respondents selected which options align with their belief. The same process occurs if the respondent chose the negative option; they were directed to a list of options on why they believe social media has positive effects on the way things are going in the country. Respondents selected which options align with their belief. The options given were chosen based on research of the positive and negative effects of social media (Anderson, Vogels, Perrin, & Rainie, 2022).

Next, respondents were asked who they *most* trust to learn about politics from (Q.17). The options include family, friends, influencer, professor/teacher, mass media, don't know, or other. Research shows that these sources are typical areas where political information is taught. The question was designed to discover who respondents *most* trust to learn about politics from, rather than selecting multiple trustworthy sources.

Lastly, respondents were asked about their voting participation in recent elections and plans to vote in future elections (Q.18-19).

The survey analyzes responses to see what political and social media trends are common among members of Generation Z. Before receiving the results, hypothesis were created based on research to predict the trends expected to see in the results.

Hypothesis

H[1]: Majority of the sample's race/ethnicity will be white. 75.4% of undergraduate students on The University of Mississippi campus are white (College Factual).

H[2]: Around half of respondents will consider the state of Mississippi home. This hypothesis is based on the understanding that 44.6% of undergraduate students at The University of Mississippi are originally from Mississippi (College Factual).

H[3]: Majority of students will be conservative leaning, since The University of Mississippi resides in the politically conservative state of Mississippi (Newport, 2012).

H[4]: Majority of respondents receive their political news from social media. A Pew Research study found that about half of Americans get news on social media at least sometimes (Walker & Matsa, 2021).

H[5]: Conservative and conservative-leaning students will select outlets such as Fox News and liberal and liberal-learning students will select outlets such as CNN or MSNBC. A Pew Research study states: "Those who name Fox News and MSNBC display roughly the same high levels of partisanship. About nine-in-ten of those whose main source is Fox News (93%) identify as Republican, very close to the 95% of those who name MSNBC and identify as Democrats" (Grieco, 2020). This study measures the popularity of Fox News, ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, CNN, NPR, New York Times, and MSNBC. All these news sources were tested in the survey, along with the addition of more that have grown in popularity since the Pew Research study was conducted.

H[6]: Majority of respondents will select that they actively use platforms such as YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, or TikTok. These platforms are among the most popular platforms for Generation Z users and ages 18-25 females, presumably most of the sample population (H2, H3).

A study done by Pew Research Center shows that the most popular platforms among US teens in 2022 are, in order from most popular to least, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, WhatsApp, Reddit, Tumblr. The chart shows the changes from this data in 2014-2015 (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022). Figure 7 shows that YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitch, Reddit, and TikTok, were not included in the 2014-2015 survey but are now very prominent platforms among US teens.

It is also important to note that Facebook has decreased in popularity among teens, while

Instagram and Snapchat have significantly increased.

Figure 7. Pew Research Data on usage of social media platforms (2022 v. 2014)

Since 2014-15, TikTok has arisen; Facebook usage has dropped; Instagram, Snapchat have grown

% of U.S. teens who say they ever use any of the following apps or sites

YouTube 95

TikTok 67
Instagram 62
Snapchat 59

Facebook 32

Twitter 23
Twitch 20
WhatsApp 17
Reddit 14

Tumblr 5

2014-15   2022

Note: Teens refer to those ages 13 to 17. Those who did not give an answer are not shown. The 2014-15 survey did not ask about YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitch and Reddit. TikTok debuted globally in 2018.
Source: Survey conducted April 14-May 4, 2022.
"Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022"

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All the demographic characteristics of the respondents can be tied into the

research on which social media platforms these individuals are on. Different ages,

genders, or races/ethnicities have different results to which social media platforms are

used most frequently, "For example, teen boys are more likely than teen girls to say they

use YouTube, Twitch and Reddit, whereas teen girls are more likely than teen boys to use

TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat" (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022). These

are common characteristics among this generation based on different social and cultural

uses of each platform.

H[7]: Respondents will check their social media accounts several times a day. Pew Research shows that nearly half of teens say they use the Internet "almost constantly" in 2022 (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022).

H[8]: Most respondents will not intentionally follow any political influencers. Those that do may only follow 1-2 or 3-5.

H[9]: Majority of respondents will choose that social media has a negative impact on the way things are going in the country. Since the survey refers to politics, it can be assumed respondents will choose the negative option. If the survey were focusing on influencer marketing, more respondents would possibly select that social media has positive effects. Pew Research study on Teens Social Media Consumption further proves H[9]. Data shows teens see the negative effects of social media for society, but do not acknowledge that the negative effects are affecting their personal life (Anderson, Vogels, Perrin, & Rainie, 2022). The question asks respondents to choose the answer based on "the way things are going in the country". If a respondent selects the positive answer, they are directed to a list of options on why they believe social media has positive effects. Respondents must select which option BEST aligns with their belief.

H[10]: Respondents will choose Communication/connection/community as the *best* reason social media has a positive effect on the way things are going in the country today. If a respondent selects the negative answer, they are directed to a list of options on why they believe social media has negative effects. Respondents must select which option *most* aligns with their belief.

H[11]: Respondents will choose Misinformation/made up news Hate/harassment/extremism as the *best* reason social media has a negative effect on the way things are going in the country today.

H[12]: College-aged respondents in the survey will choose Influencers as who they trust most to learn about politics from. As discussed in the literature review, Instabrain argues that Generation Z learns political beliefs more from social media than they do from a parent or a teacher. Instabrain argues that Generation Z typically has more in common with members of their generation in another country than they do with members of a different generation in the United States (Weise, 2019).

CHAPTER IV

This survey was sent out to students on The University of Mississippi campus. The survey focused on respondents' social media usage, attitudes towards social media, political ideologies, news consumption, and voting behaviors. The survey received 236 responses.

The intended audience was all members on Ole Miss campus, ranging from students to staff or faculty. The survey intended to compare the differences in results from different age groups. However, of the 236 survey respondents, 235 are Generation Z respondents (above the age of 18) (99.57% of sample). 47.46% of respondents classify as freshmen. 18.64% of respondents classify as sophomore. 17.37% of respondents classify as junior. 15.68% of respondents classify as a senior. Only 1 graduate student participated in the survey and 1 member responded with the "other" option. Therefore, the survey specifically measures responses from members of Generation Z. The study focuses on their demographics, social media usage, attitude towards social media, political ideologies, and political participation.

Of the 236 survey respondents, 21.70% are male and 77.87% are female. 1 identifies as non-binary/third gender and accounts for 0.43% of the sample. My sample consisted of a not representative racial composition including about 86.32% White, 7.26% Black, 1.71% Latino/a, 1.71% Asian, and 2.99% biracial. My sample was geographically representative, with 46.19% from Mississippi and 53.81% from out-of-state.

Table 2. Survey Sample Characteristics

Demographics	Sample Characteristics (%)
Classification	
Freshmen	47.46
Sophomore	18.64
Junior	17.37
Senior	15.68
Other	>1
Age	
18-25	99.57
25-35	>1
35-45	0
45-55	0
55+	0
Gender	
Male	21.7
Female	77.87
Non-Binary	>1
Ethnicity	
White	86.32
Black or African American	7.26
Asian	1.71
Latino/a	1.71
Biracial	2.99
State considered home	
Mississippi	46.19
Out-of-state	53.81

Social Media Usage

Figure 8. Social media platforms respondents actively use
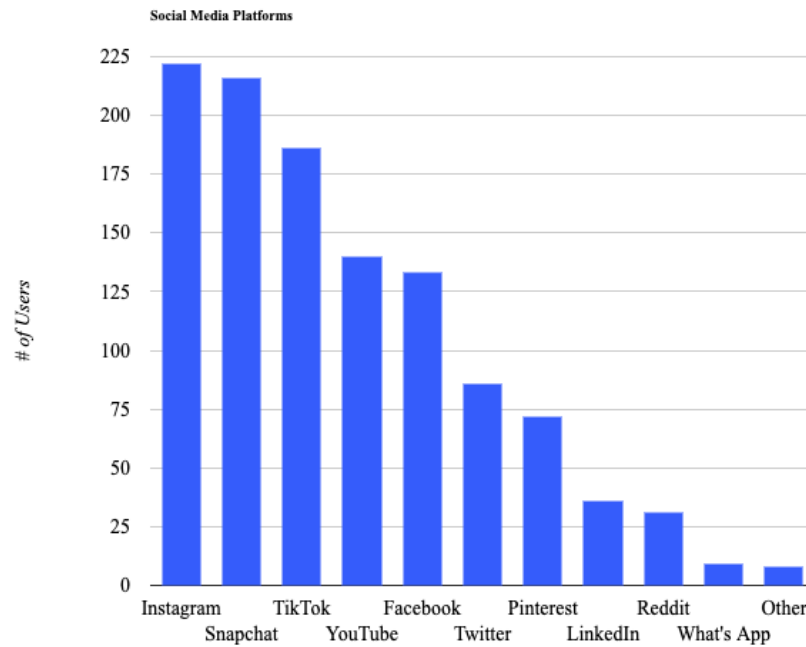
Results reflect data from Pew Research Study highlighted in H[6]. A study done by Pew Research Center shows that the most popular platforms among US teens in 2022 are, in order from most popular to least, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, WhatsApp, Reddit, Tumblr (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat, 2022). The survey results show Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, then YouTube being the most popular among respondents, all who are members of Generation Z and under 25.

Table 3. How often respondents check their favorite social media sites

Usage Per Day	Count (_/234)	%
Several Times a Day	219	94.81%
Once a Day	8	3.46%
A Few Times a Week	2	0.87%
Once a Week	1	0.43%
Less Often	1	0.43%

Results reflect data from H[7] that shows that nearly half of teens say they use the internet "almost constantly" in 2022. Nearly the entire population, 94.81%, of respondents say they check social media several times a day. These results reflect just how much time and attention members of Generation Z are giving to these platforms.

Political Ideologies + News Consumption

The next segment of results focuses on respondents' political ideologies and what sources they frequently receive their political news.

Figure 9. Respondents Political Ideology
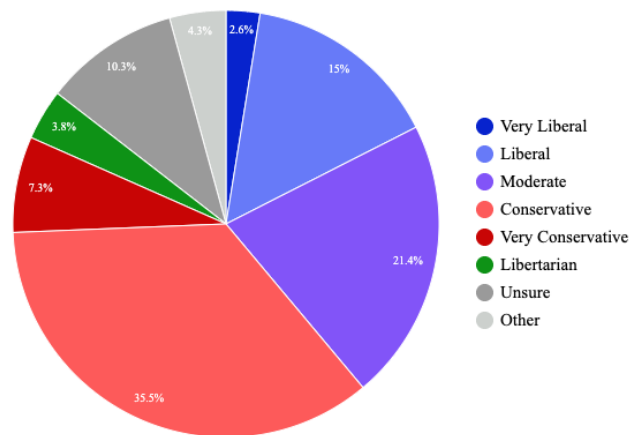
As predicted in H[3], majority of respondents are conservative, since The University of Mississippi resides in the politically conservative state of Mississippi. 21.4% of respondents identify as moderate and 15% identify as liberal. Only 7.3% identify as Very Conservative and 2.6% identify as Very Liberal. The majority of respondents, approximately 70%, fall towards the middle. The minority, approximately 10%, identify strong political ideologies towards one side. This is an interesting trend to note among Generation Z.

Figure 10. Where Respondents Receive Political News From
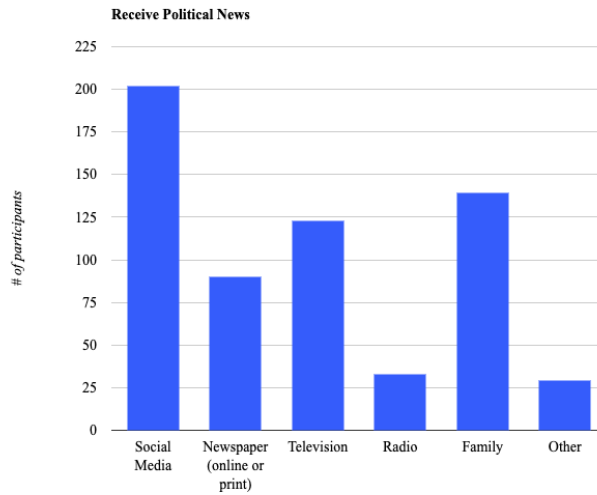
As predicted in H[4], majority of respondents receive their political news from social media. As shown in Table 3, members of Generation Z are checking social media several times a day. This makes social media a strong option for Generation Z members to receive political news. Respondents also chose family and television as frequent places they receive political news. Although social media is the most popular for Generation Z, other traditional sources are still available to them.

Figure 11. Specific Outlets Respondents Prefer:

News Outlets

# of Participants
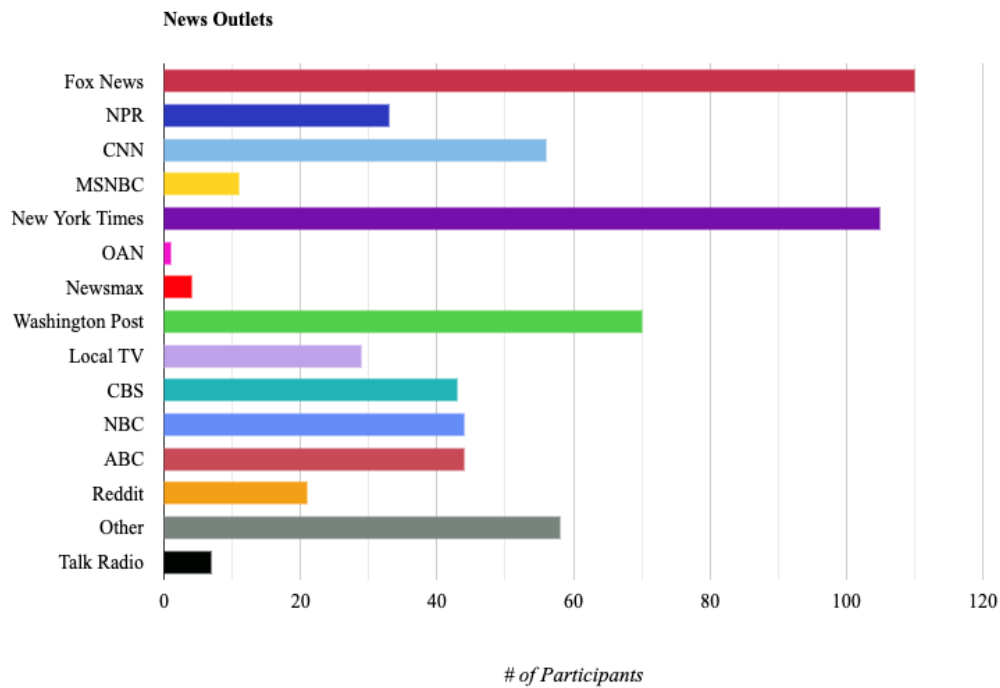
As predicted in H[5], conservative and conservative-leaning students will select outlets such as Fox News and liberal and liberal-learning students will select outlets such as CNN or MSNBC. As shown in Table 7, majority of respondents are conservative, correlating with results from Table 9 that Fox News is the most popular news outlet among respondents. New York Times is a popular source that was not predicted in H[5] n. Other popular outlets among respondents include CNN, Washington Post, and Other. Other could potentially include social media citizen journalists or influencers.

Figure 12. Number of political influencers respondents intentionally follow
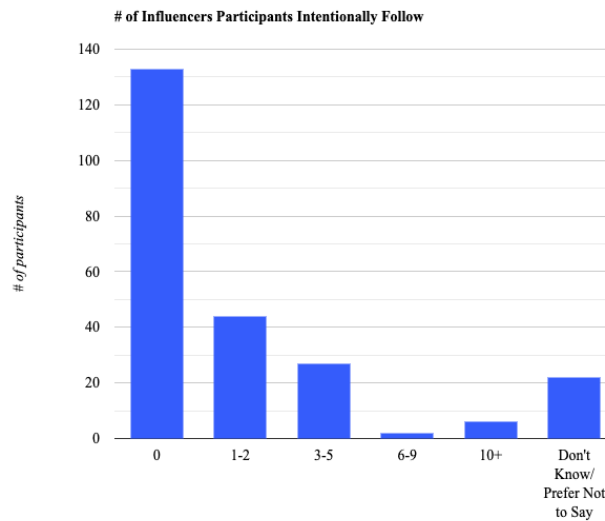
As predicted in H8, most respondents do not intentionally follow any political influencers. 67.84% do not follow any political influencers. 18.8% follow 1-2 and 11.54% follow 3-5 influencers. However, just because a majority does not intentionally follow political influencers does not mean they are not frequently exposed to them on social media platforms.

Figure 13. Who do respondents most trust to learn about politics
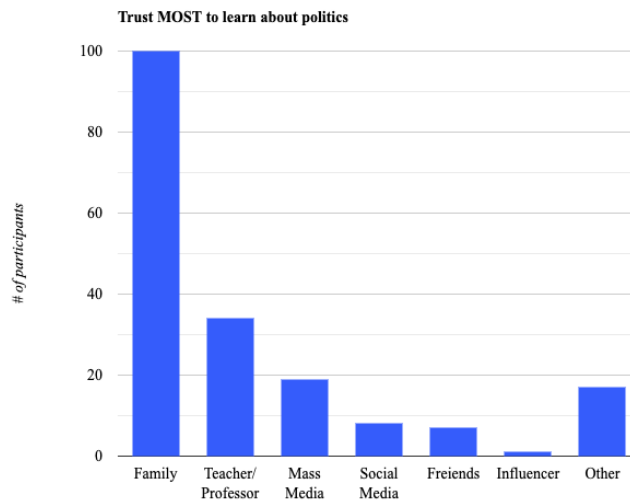
H^{12} was disproven by results from the survey. H^{12} predicted that college-aged respondents in the survey will choose influencers as who they trust most to learn about politics from. In the literature review, Instabrain argued that Generation Z learns political beliefs more from social media than they do from a parent or a teacher.

A key point of the survey is to understand where members of Generation Z are receiving their political news from. When asked who respondents most trust to learn about politics, approximately half (100) of respondents most trust their family members to learn about politics.

Attitudes towards social media

Because H^4 predicted that majority of respondents receive their political news from social media, it is important to understand members of Generation Z's overall attitudes towards social media.

Figure 14. Attitudes on the effects social media has on the way things are going in this country today
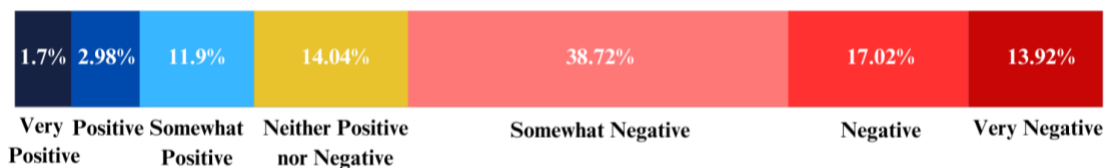
Many responses fall towards the middle, meaning that most respondents did not feel more strongly towards either positive or negative. Majority of responses were on the negative side, accounting for 69.36% of the responses. The positive attitudes only received 16.59% of the responses.14.04% of responses were neutral. Next, the survey asks respondents why they chose social media having a positive or negative effect.

Table 4. Main reason for thoughts on social media having a mostly *positive* effect on the way things are going in the country

Reasons for Positive Effects	Count
Helping people stay informed and aware	35
Access to news	31
Communication/connection/community	30
Exposure to different opinions or viewpoints	28
Activism and social movements	22
Visibility for marginalized groups	21
Holding people or institutions accountable	19
Other	1

39 respondents were directed the question referring to the positive effects of social media. They were then given a list of reasons why they believed social media has a mostly positive effect on the way things are going in the country. They were able to select as many options as they agreed with. Almost all respondents (89.7%) who believed social media has a mostly positive effect when helping people stay informed and aware. 31 respondents (79.5%) selected that having access to news was a positive effect of social media. 30 respondents (76.9%) agree that communication, connection, and community are positive components of social media.

Table 5. Main reason for thoughts on social media having a mostly *negative* effect on the way things are going in the country

Reason for Negative Effects	Count
Misinformation/made up news/hate/extremism/harassment	137
People believing everything (gullible), People not knowing what to believe	128
Censorship/Bias	100
Negative impacts on mental health	95
Too much negativity on social media	89
Echo chambers/ People getting only one point of view	75
Sensationalism/exaggerations	69
Partisanship/Polarization/Division	63
Privacy or data collections concerns	41
Other	2

161 respondents were directed the question referring to the positive effects of social media. They were then given a list of reasons why they believed social media has a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in the country. They were able to select as many options as they agreed with. Majority of respondents (85%) believed social media has a mostly negative effect because of misinformation, made up news, hate, extremism, and harassment. 128 respondents (79.5%) believe that people believing everything or people not knowing what to believe are negative aspects of social media. 100 respondents (62.1%) believe that censorship or bias is a negative downside to social media. These responses are very important to take into consideration when understanding where members of Generation Z is receiving their news.

Political Participation

      The following section of the survey was included to gauge respondents' political participation. The questions below asked respondents if they voted in the 2020 presidential election, if they plan to vote in the 2022 congressional election, and if they are registered to vote.

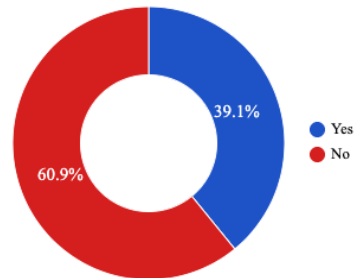Figure 15. Respondents that voted in the 2020 presidential election

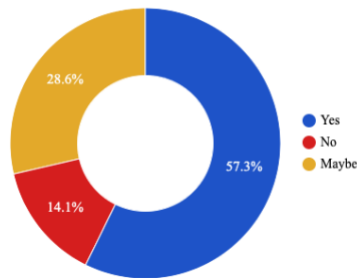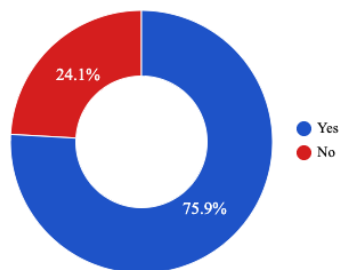Figure 16. Respondents that plan to vote in the 2022 congressional election

Figure 17. Respondents that are registered to vote

CHAPTER V

From this research, it can be concluded that members of Generation Z actively use social media sites. The most popular platforms among Generation Z include Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube. Facebook and Twitter fell behind, only being used by 56.83% and 36.75% of respondents, respectively. This further explains why politicians need to be present on the most popular social media sites among Generation Z to reach them.

The survey revealed a handful of interesting trends common among Generation Z. First, it is important to note that 219 respondents stated they checked social media "Several Times a Day", accounting for 94.81% of the respondents. However, the majority, 69.36%, of the respondents stated that social media had an overall negative effect on the way things are going in this country today. It is interesting to see that even though the majority believe social media has negative effects, they still continue to give it their attention several times a day.

I believe that when faced with the choice between "positive" or "negative", respondents naturally selected that social media is negative because they feel that that is the more correct answer. Just because the respondent selected a more "negative" leaning answer does not mean that they do not agree with the positive reasons for social media. Older generations tend to tell members of younger generations, primarily Generation Z, that social media is bad. This could be one potential reasoning why majority of respondents (69.36%) selected that social media had an overall negative effect on the way things are going in this country today, although this is not their true beliefs.

Next, one of the most determining questions in this survey asks respondents who they *most* trust to learn politics from. H[13] predicts that majority of respondents will choose influencers as someone they trust most to learn about politics. However, this hypothesis was disproven. Family was the most popular choice among nearly half of respondents. Influencers, however, only were chosen by 1 respondent. It can be assumed that because respondents were asked who they trust *most* to learn about politics, respondents chose family and friends over choosing influencers. However, this does not mean they are not being exposed to, or trusting, influencers.

One limitation of my study included the reach of respondents. My research mainly focused on Generation Z as a whole, but my study only sampled students at The University of Mississippi. If given more time and funding, I would send the survey to a larger pool of Generation Z members. Results would have been more diverse, providing different results for some questions.

Although the overall goal of this research was to understand better where members of Generation Z are exposed to politics, this data can lead the way to further studies on whether this exposure ultimately leads to an increase in voter turnout. Based on my research, the more Generation Z is exposed to politics on social media, the more likely they will vote in future elections. The overarching goal of each political campaign is to win voters. If political parties can reach these voters where they are on social media, they will have a better chance of winning their votes in future elections. Encouraging political participation on social media is the best way to get this generation involved in politics.

As you can see from groups such as Gen Z for Change, Generation Z activists are calling among their peers to get out and make a difference. Generation Z is a highly connected generation rooted in the idea that they can make a change (Weise, 2019). Suppose politicians can be present on these social media platforms and directly speak to members of Generation Z. In that case, they will form a much deeper and stronger connection with this group of voters, ultimately encouraging them to participate in political campaigns.

Most importantly, this research shows that getting Generation Z involved in politics while they are young is crucial to the future success of a political party. This generation is very aware of the world around them as they are constantly exposed to it through social media. They are being exposed far more at a younger age than any previous generation. As the example of Valeria Shashenok demonstrated, members of Generation Z are watching historical events unfold in real-time. They are forming opinions about the vast world around them at such a young age, and these opinions have the potential to stick with them for life. That is why political parties need to act now. Now is the time to connect with this generation and form a meaningful, lasting relationship with them. In the future, this generation will be the leaders in our country. Politicians must understand how Generation Z's opinions are being shaped now, specifically through social media, and how to continue to connect with them throughout the future.

One of the most exciting parts of researching this topic is that it unfolds with time. When I brainstormed ideas for topics two years ago, TikTok was just in its early phases of being a powerful tool for spreading information. Initially, I primarily wanted to focus

on just TikTok. However, there needed to be more data and public knowledge on TikTok at the time. As of March 31st, 2023, Congress is holding hearings with TikTok CEO, Shou Zi Chew, to ban the app potentially. In under two years, TikTok has grown drastically in American society. Now, over 150 million Americans actively use TikTok every day. It has become a hub for the spread of information domestically and internationally. Many small or large businesses utilize the app to sell their products or services. If I continue this thesis, I will examine many pros and cons of the current and potential power of TikTok to spread political information in society. Many studies are beginning to be released on this platform's influence in the spread of information, domestically and internationally.

It is essential to acknowledge that media is constantly evolving. My research gives a brief overview of the history, intended to provide a glimpse into this ever-changing world of media and how information is spread throughout society. Although TikTok is today's new media, it can soon become the media of tomorrow, and a new platform will come in and change the media landscape yet again. Society, specifically politicians, must constantly adapt to the new media landscape to continue to connect with voters.

This study further shows that Generation Z, specifically college-aged students at The University of Mississippi, is actively present on social media platforms and uses these platforms each day to learn and spread information. For politicians to reach this specific niche of voters, they must find effective ways to interact with them on social media platforms. Gaining Generation Z's trust now will significantly benefit a political party's success in the future.

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1. What is your role at the University of Mississippi?
    a. Freshmen
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Graduate Student
    f. Faculty / Staff
    g. Other

2. What is your age?
    a. 18-25
    b. 25-35
    c. 35-45
    d. 45-55
    e. 55+

3. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Other
    d. Prefer Not to Say

4. What is your Race/Ethnicity?
    a. White
    b. African American
    c. Latino/a
    d. Asian
    e. Biracial
    f. Prefer Not to Say

5. What state do you consider home?
    a. List them ..

6. How would you describe your political ideology?
    a. Very Liberal
    b. Liberal
    c. Moderate
    d. Conservative
    e. Very Conservative
    f. Libertarian
    g. Prefer not to say

7. Where do you receive your political news? Check all that apply:

a. Social media
b. Newspaper (including online subscriptions)
c. Television
d. Radio

8. Which specific outlets do you prefer? Check all that apply
   a. Fox News
   b. NPR
   c. CNN
   d. MSNBC
   e. New York Times
   f. OAN
   g. Newsmax
   h. Washington Post
   i. Local TV
   j. CBS
   k. ABC
   l. NBC
   m. Reddit
   n. Other

9. Please select all the social media platforms you actively use
   a. Snapchat
   b. Instagram
   c. Facebook
   d. Twitter
   e. Tik Tok
   f. Whats App
   g. YouTube
   h. Pinterest
   i. LinkedIn
   j. Reddit
   k. Other

10. Thinking about the social media sites you use… how often do you check in to your favorite social media sites?
    a. Once a Day
    b. Several Time a Day
    c. A few times a week
    d. Once a week
    e. Less Often
    f. Don't Know

11. Do you intentionally follow any influencers who would be considered political influencers?

a. None
b. 1-2
c. 3-5
d. 6-9
e. 10+
f. Prefer not to answer

12. What are the names of the names of the political influencers you follow?

13. Overall, what effect would you say social media has on the way things are going in this country today?
    a. Mostly positive
    b. Mostly negative
    c. Neither positive or negative
    d. No answer

14. (If #14 is A…otherwise, skip to #17). What is the main reason you think social media has a mostly positive effect on the way things are going in this country today?
    a. Helping people stay informed and aware
    b. Communication/connection/community
    c. Visibility for marginalized groups
    d. Activism and social movements
    e. Exposure to different opinions or viewpoints
    f. Holding people or institutions accountable
    g. Access to news
    h. Don't Know
    i. Other

15. (If #14 is A…otherwise, skip to #17). What is the main reason you think social media has a mostly negative effect on the way things are going in this country today? (Pew Research)
    a. Misinformation/made up news Hate/harassment/extremism
    b. People believing everything/not knowing what to believe Censorship/bias
    c. Too much negativity
    d. Partisanship/polarization/division
    e. Echo chambers/people getting one point of view Anti-Trump or anti-conservative views Sensationalism/exaggeration/clickbait Vanity/drama/impacts on mental health
    f. Privacy or data collection concerns/bad actors
    g. Don't Know
    h. Other

16. Who do you trust most to learn about politics from?
    a. Family

b. Friends
c. Influencer
d. Professor/Teacher
e. Mass Media
f. Don't Know
g. Other

17. DID YOU VOTE IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?
    a. Yes
    b. No

18. DO YOU PLAN TO VOTE IN THE 2022 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't Know

Acknowledge: My sample is more educated because it's sent out to all people with or in the process of getting college degrees.
It is not a representative sample because it does not accurately represent the entire population.