Political Education amid Ai-Influence: Student Perceptions of Political Manipulation by Generative AI

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Abstract. *The development of generative artificial intelligence has introduced new risks in the form of political manipulation through disinformation and deepfakes, which are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from authentic political narratives. College students, as first-time voters and agents of social change, occupy a strategic yet vulnerable position regarding this phenomenon. This study aims to uncover students' perceptions of AI-based political manipulation, its impact on their political views, and the role of political education in addressing these challenges. The study employs a phenomenological qualitative approach supplemented by case studies, utilizing three data collection techniques: a content identification experiment, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussions with students in the cities of Malang and Yogyakarta. Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke reveals that students possess a functional yet uneven perceptual awareness of manipulative content; they tend to perceive themselves as resistant to AI's influence while acknowledging others' vulnerability; and they assess that formal political education remains inadequate in integrating AI literacy into the curriculum. These findings underscore the urgency of transforming civic education as a pillar of social resilience in the face of a crisis of public trust caused by AI-based political manipulation.*
Keywords**:** *Political Education; AI Influence; Student Perceptions; Political Manipulation; Generative AI.*

1. Introduction

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology has transformed the way information is created, shared, and even interpreted, particularly in the realm of political [1]. Currently, this technology can produce realistic audio, images, and even videos that are nearly indistinguishable from the real thing. In political communication, the development of generative AI offers clear efficiencies and benefits, but it also poses serious risks particularly in the context of manipulating public opinion through the fabrication of political narratives, especially in the case of political deepfakes that are difficult to distinguish from reality.

Such AI-based political manipulation poses a substantial new challenge to the development of democracy, particularly because it can alter patterns of thought even in political decision-making and diminish the quality of citizen participation. In current practice, generative AI technology is widely used to mimic political support and spread misinformation, which influences public opinion [2]. College students who are also known as an intellectual group, first-time voters, and agents of social change occupy a vital position and are particularly vulnerable to politically engineered or digitally manipulated opinions. Unbeknownst to them, repeated exposure to AI-engineered political content has the potential to alter students' perceptions, preferences, and even political attitudes. This raises important questions about this generation's ability to identify and respond to such manipulation.

Political education, particularly in higher education, is often viewed as a strategic tool in shaping citizens who possess critical, reflective, and responsible thinking skills. However, conventional political education tends to emphasize static knowledge rather than teaching students to critically adapt to political manipulation supported by artificial intelligence a field that continues to evolve and develop dynamically. This limitation is compounded by the fact that students lack a robust conceptual foundation to critically identify, understand, evaluate, and respond to manipulative political content generated by artificial intelligence. In this context, political education must be understood not merely as a mechanism for transferring civic knowledge, but

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as a pedagogical response to the transformation of epistemic conditions that shape an individual's political judgment. Furthermore, it is necessary to develop AI literacy, clear regulations, and political data governance to safeguard digital democracy [3].

Numerous studies have examined political disinformation and hoaxes on social media, focusing on digital literacy, the spread of hoaxes, and their impact on voter behavior. Few studies, however, have examined the role of generative AI as a new actor in political manipulation, particularly from the perspective of political education rather than merely as a technical or ethical issue. However, issues such as freedom of speech and the impact on ideological and political education are among the challenges faced by [4]. Furthermore, much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative measurements of exposure levels or trust in certain information. Consequently, this provides only a limited understanding of how an individual subjectively interprets and comprehends manipulative content within the context of their own political experiences.

This study aims to bridge this gap by positioning students' perceptions as pedagogical subjects rather than merely as social media users. Furthermore, it frames generative AI as a substantial issue for political education. It also explores how students understand, perceive, and negotiate AI-based political manipulation using a phenomenological approach. This phenomenon essentially points to a new epistemic crisis in national life related to a crisis of trust in the veracity of political information a crisis that has the potential to erode social cohesion and the quality of democracy if not promptly addressed through curriculum updates and adaptive political education pedagogy. Therefore, this study positions political education not merely as a vehicle for transferring civic knowledge, but as a form of social resilience to address the crisis of public trust caused by AI-based political manipulation. Consequently, this study seeks to answer three questions: (1) how do college students perceive AI-based political manipulation; (2) how does AI-based political manipulation influence students' political views; and (3) what role does political education play as a pillar of social resilience in countering the influence of AI-based political manipulation on students' political views.

2. Reasearch Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology within a case study framework. It adopts a qualitative approach based on the assumption that AI-based political phenomena are socially structured, systematic, and widespread. This method offers perspectives, beliefs, and experiences that may be overlooked by quantitative approaches [5]. Therefore, understanding these phenomena is not achieved solely through quantitative measurement; rather, it requires an in-depth investigation of the meanings, experiences, and ways of thinking of the research subjects. By using a phenomenological approach, researchers can explore in depth how students perceive manipulative political content, to what extent students are aware of manipulative elements in digital content, and how students' political attitudes are shaped based on their direct experiences. The subjects of this study are students in the cities of Malang and Yogyakarta. Both cities have large student populations and diverse sociopolitical backgrounds.

Data collection in this study utilized three complementary techniques. First, an experiment was conducted by exposing participants to authentic political content and content generated by generative AI. Following this, observations and measurements were taken of the students' responses and reactions to both types of content. Second, after participating in the experimental sessions, the students were interviewed in depth. This was aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the students' perceptions, critical awareness, and perspectives regarding AI-based political manipulation. Third, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with the students to discuss the role of political education in strengthening political digital literacy. By employing these three processes sequentially, the resulting data will provide a comprehensive overview and foster a broader and more diverse understanding of this complex social phenomenon [6].

Once the data has been collected, it will be analyzed using thematic qualitative data analysis based on Braun & Clarke's framework. Through systematic data coding, this method helps provide a deeper understanding of the subjects' experiences. Furthermore, this analysis supports the development of relevant and significant themes, helping researchers identify patterns and meanings within the qualitative data. Therefore, this analysis is highly beneficial for research focused on human experiences [7]. These stages include data familiarization, coding and theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and finally report writing. Data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) will be analyzed to identify key themes related to students' political perceptions and attitudes. Meanwhile, data from the experiment will be analyzed based on patterns of student responses to content generated by generative AI compared to the original content. These two analyses will then be synthesized to gain an understanding of students' perceptions, the impact of AI-based political manipulation, and the role of political education in addressing this phenomenon.

3. Result and Discussion

Data for this study were collected from students currently enrolled in Malang and Yogyakarta, across various academic majors. Each participant underwent three stages of data collection. The first stage consisted of an experimental session, during which each participant was presented with six pieces of political content in the form of text, images, and videos three of which were authentic content and the other three were AI-generated political content. The results of this experimental session were recorded on the response sheet in Form E-1. The second stage was an in-depth interview session. The third stage was a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on these three stages allowed for the triangulation of results across various data sources and ultimately yielded three main themes from the thematic analysis that aligned with the research objectives. The general characteristics of the participants and the data collection tools used are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collection Instruments and Focus of Finding

Instrument	Location	Focus of the Generated Data
Experiment + Form E-1	Malang & Yogyakarta	Accuracy of identifying original vs. AI-generated content; confidence level; emotional response.
In-depth Interview	Malang & Yogyakarta	Cognitive strategies, personal experiences, impact on political views
Focus Group Discussion	Malang & Yogyakarta	Collective perception, polarization dynamics, educational model recommendations

These three instruments allow for the triangulation of results across data sources.
Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis yielded three main themes that align with the research questions. These findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Sub-themes, and Key Findings from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Findings
Student Perceptions	Content recognition pattern	Text identification is easier than image or video identification; disparities exist between study programs.
	Understanding forms of manipulation	Deepfake videos and voice cloning are the most well-known examples; understanding is inconsistent.
	Emotional response	Anger (images), worry (videos), discomfort (across content types)
Influence on Political Views	Impact on oneself	The majority stated they were unaffected (third-person effect).
	Impact on others	Strong recognition of the vulnerability of young people and the elderly.
	Attitudes towards AI as a threat	The majority agrees that AI threatens democracy and that digital literacy is needed.

Theme	Sub-theme	Key Findings
The Role of Civic Education	Current conditions	The formal curriculum has not yet addressed AI literacy.
	Competency gap	Digital literacy is taught informally; AI literacy is virtually absent.
	Ideal model	Integration, practicality, multidisciplinarity, institutionalization, student agency

3.1 Student Perceptions of Political Content Generated by Generative AI

Experimental data show that students possess fairly good abilities and competencies to distinguish between AI-generated political content and authentic content across various media types, though this ability is not uniform. Text-based statements are relatively easy to distinguish, but video and image content present their own challenges in identification. Interestingly, students majoring in communication studies were able to identify such content with greater proficiency compared to students majoring in Civic Education. This suggests that media education helps students identify and recognize content generated by AI.

Students in the communication studies program demonstrated high confidence on nearly all test items. According to this data, exposure to media and communication materials—which include production and visual grammar—provides students with an additional visual sensitivity that students from other academic backgrounds, including Civic Education, do not possess, even though the latter should actually have a high level of relevance to this field. The results indicate that there are interdisciplinary differences that warrant attention: the ability to detect AI manipulation should not be limited solely to students in Communication Studies programs. This competency is relevant to digital citizenship in general and should be integrated across all academic programs. It is important to note that integrating media education with artificial intelligence can significantly enhance personalized learning experiences, foster creativity and innovation, and improve students' media literacy and critical thinking. This will better prepare students for the complexities of the digital age [8].

During in-depth interviews, participants developed cognitive strategies to help verify the authenticity of news by cross-checking with trusted news sources. This was most frequently cited by participants as the verification strategy they used:

"First, research the news to see if it actually happened or not. Then, read the content of the news carefully and compare it with other news sources." (W1.4, Informant, Malang)

Such a strategy is known as the "lateral reading" approach, which is commonly used in modern digital literacy. Lateral reading helps internet users evaluate the credibility of information, especially in situations where misinformation can have significant consequences [9]. This lateral reading approach is carried out by reading one source and comparing it with another source simultaneously. A key finding of this study is that students engage in spontaneous fact-checking, which suggests that this discovery will serve as a foundation for bridging the discussion of Theme 3 regarding curriculum gaps.

Participants' understanding of AI manipulation also varied. One informant stated that witnessing manipulated videos linked to President Prabowo Subianto during the 2024 presidential election campaign was a common occurrence, illustrating content manipulation through deepfakes or voice cloning. During the FGD session, participants also noted that "political content generated by AI is currently difficult to distinguish because it is so realistic and convincing" (FGD notes, Topic 1.1). However, other partisans also noted that "some of those unfamiliar with AI's capabilities and educational expertise still rely on indicators such as resolution or the imperfect finishing of the content" (W1.3, Informant from Malang).

From an affective perspective, anger frequently emerged as a response to AI-manipulated political content, while the most dominant emotion was concern regarding deepfake video content. The majority of partisan responses reported feeling "uncomfortable" beyond the standard emotional categories provided. This indicates epistemic unease regarding the blurred line between genuine reality and fabrication.

3.2 The Impact of AI-Driven Political Manipulation on Students' Political Views

Attitude-scale data reveal a dominant pattern: most partisans view artificial intelligence as a structural threat to democracy, and the majority disagree that AI-generated content could influence their political decisions. This finding aligns with the *third-person effect*, whereby individuals tend to believe that media influences others more than it does themselves. According to the third-person effect model, people feel unaffected by unwanted social media messages [10]. This phenomenon is important to understand not only as a neutral cognitive bias

but also as a psychological mechanism that can lead individuals to become less vigilant against manipulation, as those who feel immune are less motivated to cross-check information.

In fact, one partisan stated that they were not concerned about being influenced by AI-generated content: *"Never, because I compare it with other sources." (W2.1, Informant, Malang)*. This sentiment was echoed by several partisans during the interview sessions. However, when asked about the impact on others, the partisan actually shared that an acquaintance's political choice was influenced by manipulated political content during the 2024 Presidential Election: *"It happened—after seeing edited content about Prabowo on TikTok suggesting election fraud, they ultimately switched their vote to Candidate 01." (W2.2, Informant, Malang)*

The same partisan also explicitly described the influence process: it began with reading and viewing the content, followed by immediately believing it without conducting any research, leading to a shift in their political views and culminating in a fanatical stance. This is a significant finding indicating that students may underestimate their own vulnerability due to an asymmetry between their perception of their own individual immunity and their acknowledgment of others' vulnerability. Furthermore, the participants indicated that adolescents (ages 10–17) and those over 40 are considered the most vulnerable groups to being influenced by AI-generated content. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how people perceive media and how this impacts modern society today [11].

Furthermore, the collective dimension of AI manipulation emerged as a key concern in the focus group discussion (FGD), as it has the potential to create political polarization through narratives that favor in-groups while simultaneously attacking out-groups. This can hinder constructive dialogue (FGD notes, Topic 2.2). The patterns of partisan attitude scale responses to the five main statements are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Participants' Attitude Scale Response Patterns. SS = Strongly Agree; S = Agree; TS = Disagree; STS = Strongly Disagree.

No.	Statement	SS	S	TS	STS
1	My trust in political information on social media has diminished after seeing AI-generated content.	a number of	majority	-	-
2	AI-generated content has the potential to influence my political decisions.	-	minoritas	a number of	majority
3	I need to improve my digital literacy skills to deal with AI manipulation.	majority	a number of	-	-
4	Civic education should teach how to detect AI manipulation.	majority	a number of	-	-
5	AI poses a real threat to the quality of Indonesia's democracy.	a number of	majority	-	-

The data in Table 3 show that a consistent orientation namely, the statement that AI is a real threat to the quality of Indonesian democracy received the most dominant "agree" responses. The use of artificial intelligence technologies, such as deepfakes, can pose a threat to the integrity of the democratic process [12]. This indicates that students view this AI-based manipulation as a real threat to the integrity of Indonesian democracy and not merely a phenomenon of technological advancement. Furthermore, statements regarding the need for digital literacy and the role of political education in detecting AI-based manipulated content received strong support. This demonstrates a normative awareness that the role of the education sector is central and strategic in providing such capacity.

3.3 The Role of Civic Education in the Era of AI Influence

Data from the interview and FGD sessions align in showing that political education in higher education institutions is not yet sufficient to address AI-based manipulation. In fact, a student from the Civic Education program noted that while lectures often focus on voter polarization, knowledge about AI manipulation is actually gained through activities outside the classroom, such as discussion groups:

"In class, through the coursework, there isn't much coverage of manipulation—it mostly revolves around voter polarization. I gained [knowledge about manipulation] through discussions outside of class and extracurricular organizations." (W3.1, Informant, Malang)

This situation indicates that literacy regarding AI does not always emerge as a result of formal classroom learning but rather depends more on individual initiative and a person's involvement in informal spaces such as discussions outside the classroom. Structurally, this pattern feels unfair, as students who lack access to organizations or informal activities outside the classroom risk falling behind in their digital critical thinking skills.

Digital literacy is considered a core competency and is often covered in classroom learning materials; however, AI literacy—which supports the specific competencies needed to identify and evaluate AI-generated content—has not yet been incorporated into classroom

instruction. Furthermore, AI literacy also helps reduce bias, protect privacy, ensure the ethical use of technology, and promote equal access to opportunities driven by artificial intelligence (Asrifan et al., 2024) . One participant acknowledged that *"Digital literacy has never been taught, but we've received reminders from professors"* (W3.2, Informant, Malang). FGD participants also emphasized that a lack of knowledge is not the main problem; rather, it is resistance to correction. "Not all individuals are willing to accept education or correction regarding the authenticity of the information they consume" (FGD Notes, Topic 3.2).

In political psychology, this resilience or resistance is linked to the backfire effect. This phenomenon describes how people tend to place greater trust in false information when confronted with direct corrections, especially if that information relates to their political identity. Furthermore, the strongest positive factor influencing the backfire effect—regardless of one's political stance—is the presence of echo chambers and " responses . This underscores that AI-responsive political education requires more than simply presenting corrective facts; rather, it demands dynamic planning and approaches.

When asked to propose ideas for an ideal model of political education, the participants offered five principles: (1) Combining the framework of political education with digital literacy and AI literacy into a single, integrated whole; (2) Integrating practical exercises through case studies and simulations rather than relying solely on textbook discussions; (3) Facilitating multidisciplinary fields of study that involve practitioners in those fields; (4) Making AI literacy a required course within a dynamic framework that keeps pace with the times; (5) Strengthening the role of students as agents of change to build digital resilience in the study of politics.

"An ideal political education program needs to integrate political education, digital literacy, and AI literacy through material on recognizing manipulative content, information verification, social media algorithms, the ethics of AI use, as well as hands-on practice in the wise use of technology through case studies, simulations, and training." (FGD Notes, Topic 4.1)

3.4 Synthesis of the Discussion

The three findings above illustrate a new epistemic crisis brought about by generative AI in the political sphere, such as a state of partial readiness, structural vulnerabilities, and the pedagogical importance of students. Theoretically, these results help us understand the "third-person effect" in the context of new AI-based political manipulation. This indicates that this perceptual bias applies to both conventional media and synthetic content, which differ qualitatively in how they are detected. Findings regarding the backfire effect in the context of resistance to correction also indicate that fact-based political education methods alone are insufficient to change polarized beliefs.

Students have demonstrated functional awareness and have informally internalized basic verification procedures; this is because political education produces adaptive agents of change [13]. However, this resilience is not evenly distributed and does not rely on systematic civic education. Students' need for civic education integrated with AI is a clear normative signal. The absence of AI literacy in the formal curriculum illustrates a structural gap with real democratic consequences. These findings reinforce the argument that theory-based political education leads to practical and adaptive digital critical thinking. Civic education is not merely a means of knowledge transfer but also a pillar of social resilience in the face of a crisis of public trust caused by AI-based political manipulation.

4. Conclusions

Three main, interrelated conclusions emerged from this study. First, students possess a fairly effective but uneven level of perceptual awareness regarding political manipulation generated by AI; visual content such as images and videos is more difficult to identify compared to text-based content. The dominant emotional responses to such content are anger toward manipulative images and concern regarding deepfake videos. Second,

students tend to feel more resilient regarding their own political decisions; however, they also perceive others particularly adolescents and adults over 40 as vulnerable to such manipulated political content, which can alter their political choices and views if not accompanied by content verification. Third, formal political education offered at universities is considered insufficient in preparing students for the era of AI influence. One major issue is the lack of coverage of AI literacy. The recommendation for current political education models is to integrate the political education curriculum with digital literacy and knowledge of AI through a multidisciplinary approach and case studies.

Overall, this research supports the idea that generative AI-based political manipulation represents a new form of epistemic crisis that requires changes in civic education. This necessitates a shift in the learning approach from a theoretical focus on political education toward the development of flexible, adaptive, and practical digital critical thinking skills that are formally institutionalized within Indonesia's higher education system.

5. Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations have been formulated. First, higher education institutions particularly those offering Civic Education programs need to update their political education curricula to integrate digital literacy and AI literacy as a means of adapting to contemporary developments. Second, instructors and lecturers in civic education should develop teaching methods using pedagogical approaches based on case studies and simulations; such approaches are considered to provide controlled exposure to both authentic content and AI-generated content. Third, the asymmetry between perceptions of one's own immunity and the vulnerability of others should serve as a point of reflection for students to develop a more realistic adjustment to the potential influence of AI manipulation and to encourage more consistent information verification practices. Fourth, this study is still limited to the Malang and Yogyakarta regions; therefore, it needs to be conducted in other, broader locations and requires the development and testing of a curriculum model for civics and political education that is responsive to the challenges and developments of AI.

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