The Influence of Social Media and E-WOM Mediated by Public Trust on the Decision to Elect Regional Head Candidates among Generation Z in Makassar City

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the influence of social media and Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) on the decision to vote for regional head candidates, with public trust as a mediating variable in Generation Z in Makassar City. The phenomenon of political digitalization, the increasing use of social media, and the active involvement of Generation Z in online interactions encourage the need to understand the political communication patterns of this generation. Using a quantitative approach with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method, this study examines the relationship between variables by collecting data from 238 Gen Z respondents who actively use social media as a source of political information. The results show that social media and E-WOM have a direct positive and significant effect on voting decisions. Public trust is proven to partially mediate the relationship between social media and E-WOM on political decisions. E-WOM is a dominant factor because it originates from the opinions of fellow users who are considered more authentic. Through this research, it is hoped to provide theoretical contributions by enriching the understanding of the dynamics between social media, E-WOM, public trust, and voting decisions in the context of elections, especially among generation Z. Practically, the results of this study can be a basis for regional head candidates to formulate more effective campaign strategies, by utilizing social media as a tool to build and maintain public trust, which in turn will influence the voting decisions of young voters.

Keywords: Social Media, E-WOM, Public Trust, Generation Z

I. INTRODUCTION

Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are a concrete manifestation of the implementation of local democracy, allowing the public to directly elect their leaders. This process serves not only as a political mechanism but also as a strategic tool in determining the direction of regional development and public services. Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors and Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government serve as the legal basis for the implementation of Pilkada in Indonesia. In this context, Pilkada is a crucial element in building democracy and implementing participatory governance that is responsive to community needs.

Developments in information and communication technology have significantly changed the dynamics of Pilkada. Social media is now a dominant political campaign tool due to its ability to reach voters quickly and widely. KPU Regulation Number 11 of 2020 accommodates digital campaigns in response to the digital era. In Makassar City, social media usage by Generation Z (aged 17-29) is very high, making them a strategic voter segment. They are active on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and engage in online political discussions. However, despite the high level of digital participation, there is a vulnerability to the spread of political hoaxes, which can negatively influence political perceptions and decisions.

MAFINDO data from 2023 shows that approximately 40% of hoaxes circulating during the pre-election period contained political content, with most of them spread via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of public trust as a primary filter in addressing the flood of information. The victory of the empty box in the 2018 Makassar regional election is a clear example of public distrust in the political process. More than 53% of voters rejected the sole candidate, reflecting a crisis of legitimacy and dissatisfaction with the nomination system, which was perceived as elitist.

The high penetration of social media in the run-up to the 2024 regional elections further strengthens the role of digitalization in local democratic processes. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (2024) recorded more than 210 million active internet users in Indonesia, with the majority accessing social media. A Katadata Insight Center survey (2024) found that more than 65% of young voters first obtained political information from social media. However, the challenge of disinformation remains high. Therefore, public trust in the information they receive is a crucial aspect of political decision-making.

Generation Z is known as digital natives, familiar with the digital world and tend to be selective and critical of political information. Their preference for accessing information through electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), namely information from friends, communities, or influencers on social media, has a significant influence on their political perceptions. E-WOM is more trusted than formal messages from political candidates because it is considered more authentic and socially relevant.

In the context of regional elections, an interactive digital approach is crucial. Candidates are not only required to be present online but also able to build rapport and trust through transparent and responsive communication. Unfortunately, many candidates still use social media in a one-way manner, without building meaningful engagement with voters. Furthermore, Generation Z's political participation still faces obstacles, despite their active participation in online discussions. The biggest challenge lies in sustainably building public trust so that the digital information they receive can be interpreted wisely.

The presence of e-WOM can also backfire if the information disseminated contains disinformation. Candidates must be able to effectively manage their image and respond to emerging issues in the digital space. APJII data (2023) shows that internet penetration in South Sulawesi, including Makassar, has reached 76.13%. This means that social media has become the primary communication channel in this region.

Generation Z's preference for visual and interactive communication formats such as live streaming, polls, or Q&A sessions demonstrates the need for adaptive campaign strategies. The Edelman Trust Barometer study (2020) revealed that 70% of Generation Z trust leaders who demonstrate transparency and respond quickly to issues. Therefore, public trust is a crucial mediating factor in determining the influence of social media and e-WOM on voting decisions.

According to Pew Research Center data (2021), 61% of Generation Z seek political information from social media rather than traditional media. This proportion demands a more strategic and contextual approach from candidates. Furthermore, the increasing involvement of young people as candidates demonstrates that they are not merely objects of political communication but also active subjects in the local political system.

Table 1. Permanent Voter List (DPT) of Makassar City for the 2024 Regional Elections

No	District Name	Number Village	Number Polling	Station Number of Voters		
				M	F	M + F
1	Mariso	9	76	19.721	21.285	41.006
2	Mamajang	13	79	19.715	21.998	41.713
3	Makassar	14	110	28.102	29.896	57.998
4	Ujung Pandang	10	36	8.877	9.923	18.800
5	Wajo	8	41	10.532	11.336	21.868
6	Bontoala	12	72	19.075	20.228	39.303
7	Tallo	15	186	50.753	51.808	102.561
8	Ujung Tanah	9	48	11.964	12.640	24.604

9	Panakkukang	11	179	48.414	51.938	100.352
10	Tamalate	11	236	63.086	67.636	130.722
11	Biringkanaya	11	269	73.467	78.608	152.075
12	Manggala	8	198	53.777	57.724	111.501
13	Rappocini	11	197	53.370	56.697	110.067
14	Tamalanrea	8	129	35.692	38.765	74.457
15	Kepulauan Sangkarrang	3	21	5.026	5.111	10.137
TOTAL			**1.877**	**501.571**	**535.593**	**1.037.164**

(Source: Makassar City Election Commission, 2025)

Table 1 shows that the Final Voter List (DPT) for the 2024 Makassar Regional Election reached 1,037,164 people, with Biringkanaya, Tamalate, and Panakkukang districts contributing the most voters. The large segmentation of young voters in this city further reinforces the urgency of understanding Generation Z's political behavior, particularly in the digital context.

The gap in the literature also shows that most studies only focus on a single variable, such as the influence of social media or public trust, separately. Few have synergistically examined the relationship between social media, e-WOM, and public trust on voting decisions. Therefore, this study offers a holistic approach to understanding Generation Z's voting behavior by considering the interaction of these three variables simultaneously.

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the influence of social media and e-WOM on the decision to vote for regional head candidates in Makassar City, with public trust as a mediating variable. Focusing on Generation Z is expected to provide a strategic contribution to the development of digital political communication and enrich the literature on public administration in the context of an evolving digital democracy.

II. METHODOLOGY

1. Type of Research

This study uses a quantitative approach with explanatory methods to examine the influence of social media and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on the decision to vote for regional head candidates, with public trust as a mediating variable. This approach was chosen because it allows for objective and measurable analysis of causal relationships between variables.

2. Location and Time of Research

The research was conducted in Makassar City, South Sulawesi Province, which was chosen because it is one of the metropolitan cities in Indonesia with high social media user penetration, especially among Generation Z. The research implementation period took place from October 2024 to February 2025.

3. Population and Sampling Techniques

The population in this study was Generation Z in Makassar City, aged 17 to 26, active students, first-time voters, and active users of social media as a source of political information. Because definitive population data was not available, a non-probability sampling technique with a purposive sampling approach was used.

Respondent inclusion criteria included: (1) aged 17–26, (2) active students, (3) first-time voters, and (4) active users of social media to follow regional election issues. The sample size was adjusted according to quantitative research principles and considering the needs of PLS-SEM analysis, namely a minimum of 200 respondents.

4. Research Variables and Operational Definitions

This study examines four variables:

- X1: Social Media, measured by frequency of use, intensity of political interaction, and involvement in digital campaigns.

- X2: E-WOM, measured by perceptions of the credibility and influence of opinions from friends, family, or influencers on social media.

- Z: Public Trust, measured by the level of trust in political information received through social media and E-WOM.

- Y: Voting Decision, measured by confidence, consistency of choice, and the influence of social media on voting decisions.

5. Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Primary data was obtained through an online questionnaire distributed using Google Forms, using a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was pilot tested on 30 respondents to assess clarity, content validity, and initial reliability. Secondary data was obtained from journals, statistical reports, and related literature sources.

6. Validation and Bias Control

Content validity was tested through expert assessment. Construct validity and instrument reliability were tested using outer model analysis in PLS-SEM, including outer loading values, AVE (Average Variance Extracted), CR (Composite Reliability), and Cronbach's Alpha. Common Method Bias and Social Desirability Bias were controlled through an anonymous and unleaded questionnaire design.

7. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 3.2.9 using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach. This method was chosen because it is suitable for complex models, does not require normal data distribution, and is appropriate for small to medium sample sizes. The PLS-SEM model includes:

- An outer model, to measure construct validity and reliability using convergent validity, discriminant validity, composite reliability, and Cronbach's alpha.

- An inner model, to test relationships between constructs using R-square and Q-square values.

8. Hypothesis Testing and Mediation

Hypothesis testing was conducted based on the t-statistic (>1.96) and p-value (<0.05). The mediation effect was tested using the Variance Accounted For (VAF) approach, which measures the mediating variable's contribution to the total relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The interpretation of the VAF value is as follows:

- VAF > 80%: full mediation

- 20% < VAF < 80%: partial mediation

- VAF < 20%: no mediation

This approach allows researchers to evaluate the direct and indirect relationships between social media and e-WOM on voting decisions, through the role of public trust as a mediator. With this method, the research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the synergistic influence of social media, e-WOM, and public trust on Generation Z's political behavior in the context of the Makassar City Pilkada.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

This study aims to examine in depth the influence of social media (X1) and Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM) (X2) on the decision to vote (Y), with public trust (Z) as a mediating variable in the context of the Makassar City Regional Head Election (Pilkada) by Generation Z.

a. Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 238 Gen Z respondents in Makassar City aged 17–26 who actively used social media to obtain information about the regional elections. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling with the following criteria: students, diploma holders, or graduates, and actively seeking political information through digital media: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok. The majority of respondents were female (55%), with the largest age groups being 17–20 (40%) and 21–23 (35%).

The majority were students (58.8%), followed by graduates (21%). In terms of the intensity of seeking election information through social media, 22.3% of respondents accessed it daily, 40.8% several times a week, 23.5% once a week, and 13.4% never. These results indicate the dominant use of social media as a source of political information, although there is variation in the intensity of use among young voters.

b. Outer Model Test
1) Convergent Validity

Convergent validity indicates how well an indicator reflects the construct being measured. According to Hair et al. (2009), an indicator is considered valid if it has a loading value >0.7, although a minimum value of 0.5 is still acceptable in confirmatory studies.

The PLS algorithm results show that of the 23 indicators tested, two, X1.3 (Social Media) and Z5 (Voting Decision), had outer loading values below 0.7, namely 0.641 and 0.665, respectively. However, according to Cheung et al. (2024), a construct is still acceptable if it explains at least 25% of the indicator's variance. Therefore, all indicators are considered convergently valid. The validity test results can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1 as follows:
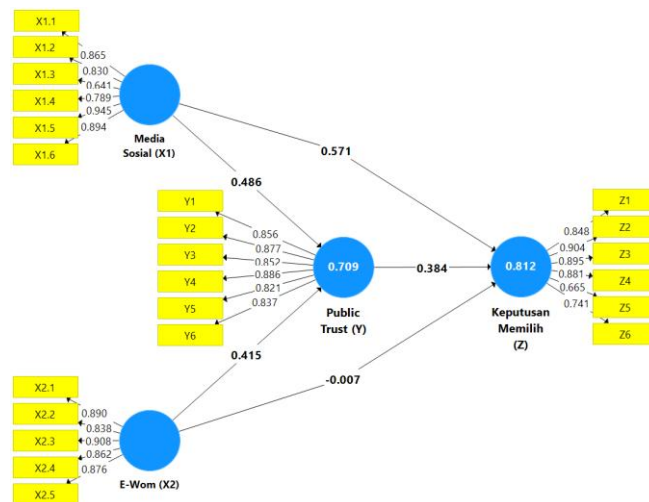
Picture 1. PLS Algorithm test results

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

Table 2. Results of Convergent Validity Test (Outer Loading)

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loadings	Description
Social Media (X1)	X1.1	**0,865**	Valid
	X1.2	**0,830**	Valid
	X1.3	**0,641**	Valid
	X1.4	**0,789**	Valid
	X1.5	**0,945**	Valid
	X1.6	**0,894**	Valid
E-WOM (X2)	X2.1	**0,890**	Valid
	X2.2	**0,838**	Valid
	X2.3	**0,908**	Valid
	X2.4	**0,862**	Valid
	X2.5	**0,876**	Valid
Public Trust (Y)	Y1.1	**0,856**	Valid
	Y1.2	**0,877**	Valid
	Y1.3	**0,852**	Valid
	Y1.4	**0,886**	Valid
	Y1.5	**0,821**	Valid
	Y1.6	**0,837**	Valid
Decision to Choose (Z)	Z.1	**0,848**	Valid
	Z.2	**0,904**	Valid
	Z.3	**0,895**	Valid
	Z.4	**0,881**	Valid
	Z.5	**0,665**	Valid
	Z.6	**0,741**	Valid

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

2) Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was tested using the cross-loading method. The results showed that each indicator had a higher loading value on the construct it measured compared to other constructs, thus meeting the criteria for discriminant validity (Kock & Lynn, 2012).

Table 3. Results of the Discriminant Validity Test of Cross-Loading Values

	E-WOM (X2)	Decision to Choose (Z)	Social Media (X1)	*Public Trust* (Y)
X1.1	0,659	0,734	**0,865**	0,640
X1.2	0,545	0,687	**0,830**	0,640
X1.3	0,401	0,543	**0,641**	0,525
X1.4	0,666	0,709	**0,789**	0,685
X1.5	0,688	0,806	**0,945**	0,707
X1.6	0,716	0,835	**0,894**	0,751
X2.1	**0,890**	0,671	0,687	0,733
X2.2	**0,838**	0,570	0,634	0,603
X2.3	**0,908**	0,688	0,687	0,747
X2.4	**0,862**	0,665	0,665	0,660
X2.5	**0,876**	0,521	0,577	0,638
Y1	0,736	0,734	0,681	**0,856**
Y2	0,747	0,720	0,709	**0,877**
Y3	0,644	0,748	0,619	**0,852**
Y4	0,639	0,774	0,725	**0,886**
Y5	0,588	0,604	0,628	**0,821**
Y6	0,620	0,679	0,713	**0,837**
Z1	0,589	**0,848**	0,732	0,692
Z2	0,675	**0,904**	0,791	0,739
Z3	0,693	**0,895**	0,763	0,708
Z4	0,706	**0,881**	0,764	0,747
Z5	0,339	**0,665**	0,594	0,557
Z6	0,501	**0,741**	0,658	0,672

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

3) Construct Reliability

Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. All values were >0.7, thus meeting the criteria for high reliability (Latan, 2015).

Table 4. Reliability Test Results

Variables/Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
E-WOM (X2)	**0,923**	**0,942**
Decision to Choose (Z)	**0,905**	**0,928**
Social Media (X1)	**0,908**	**0,931**

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

From the table above, we can see that both the Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability values for each variable are greater than 0.7. Therefore, the indicators for each latent variable are categorized as reliable, or have a good level of internal consistency.

c. Inner Model Test

1) Coefficient of Determination (R²)

The magnitude of the coefficient of determination (R-square) is used to measure the extent to which the dependent variable is influenced by other variables.

Table 5. R Square Value Results

Variables/Constructs	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Public Trust (Y)	0,709	0,704
Decision to Choose (Z)	0,812	0,808

Based on the table above, it can be seen that the results are the R Square value of the Public Trust variable of 0.709, this means that changes in the Public Trust mediation variable (Y) can be

explained by exogenous variables, namely Social Media and E-WOM simultaneously by 70.9%. Then the R Square value of the Choosing Decision variable of 0.812 means that changes in the Choosing Decision variable (Z) can be explained by the Social Media, E-WOM and Public Trust variables simultaneously by 81.2%. The R² value shows the magnitude of the influence of exogenous constructs on endogenous constructs.

2) Path Coefficient

Path coefficients are used to see the direction and strength of influence between variables in a structural model.

Table 6. Path Coefficient Values

Variables/Constructs	Decision to Choose (Z)	Social Media (X1)	*Public Trust* (Y)
E-WOM (X2)	-0,007		0,415
Decision to Choose (Z)			
Social Media (X1)	0,571		0,486
Public Trust (Y)	0,384		

The table above shows the results of the path coefficient values between variables in the structural model. E-WOM has a very weak and negative influence on voting decisions with a coefficient value of -0.007, which indicates that increased E-WOM activity has almost no direct influence on political decisions. Conversely, E-WOM has a positive effect on social media of 0.415, indicating that the more E-WOM interactions, the higher the tendency for voters to use social media. Social media has a fairly strong direct influence on voting decisions, with a coefficient value of 0.571, which means that political information received through social media encourages the formation of political decisions in Generation Z. In addition, social media also contributes to the formation of public trust with a coefficient value of 0.486. Meanwhile, public trust has a positive effect on voting decisions of 0.384, which indicates that a high level of trust in regional head candidates will encourage voters to be more confident in making their choices.

3) Goodness of Fit Test

Table 7. Average R-Square and Variance Extracted (Ave) Values

Variables/Constructs	R Square	Average Variance
		Extracted (AVE)
E-WOM (X2)		**0,766**
Decision to Choose (Z)	0,812	**0,684**
Social Media (X1)		**0,694**
Public Trust (Y)	0,709	**0,731**
	0,761	**0,719**

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

The calculation of Goodness of Fit (GoF) and Q-square Predictive Relevance is as follows:

$$GoF = \sqrt{rata\ rata R\ Square\ X\ rata\ rata\ AVE}$$

$$GoF = \sqrt{0,761\ X\ 0,719} = \mathbf{0,740}$$

Criteria : 0,00 – 0,24   small category

       0,25 – 0,37   medium category

       0,38 – 1   high category

The calculation results above show a GoF value of 0.740, thus categorizing this research model as high, and declaring the model a good model. The Q-square Predictive Relevance calculation is as follows:

$Q2 = 1 – (1 – Ry12) (1 – R\ y22)$

$Q2 = 1 - (1 – 0.812) (1 - 0.709)$

$Q2 = 0.945$

Therefore, it can be concluded that this model can be classified as good and is able to explain 94.53% of the Voting Decision (Z), while the remaining 5.47% is explained by other variables not included in this research model.

d. Hypothesis Test Results
1) Direct Effect Hypothesis Test

The Direct Effect Hypothesis Test is a statistical process used to test the existence and significance of a direct effect between variables in a model. In the context of path analysis or structural modeling, this hypothesis test is used to evaluate whether the relationship between the variables has a significant direct effect, as shown in Table 7 below.

Table 8. Results of Direct Effect Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Direct Influence	Original Sample (O)	T Statistik (| O/STDEV |))	P Values	Description
H1	Social Media (X1) -> Decision to Choose (Z)	0,571	7,510	**0,000**	Significant
H2	Social Media (X1) -> *Public Trust* (Y)	0,486	6,878	**0,000**	Significant
H3	E-WOM (X2) -> Decision to Choose (Z)	-0,007	0,116	**0,908**	Not Significant
H4	E-WOM (X2) -> *Public Trust* (Y)	0,415	5,412	**0,000**	Significant
H5	*Public Trust* (Y) -> Decision to Choose (Z)	0,384	4,676	**0,000**	Significant

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

The test results show that social media has a positive and significant influence on voting decisions, with a coefficient of 0.571, a p-value of 0.000, and a t-statistic of 7.510. This indicates that the more frequently voters use social media, the greater their likelihood of making political choices. Furthermore, social media also significantly influences public trust, with a coefficient of 0.486, a p-value of 0.000, and a t-statistic of 6.878, indicating that interactions through social media contribute to building voter trust in regional head candidates.

On the other hand, e-WOM does not significantly influence voting decisions, with a coefficient of –0.007, a p-value of 0.908, and a t-statistic of 0.116. This indicates that information obtained through e-WOM does not directly influence Generation Z's political decisions. However, e-WOM was shown to have a positive and significant influence on public trust, with a coefficient of 0.415, a p-value of 0.000, and a t-statistic of 5.412. This means that

information from the digital social environment still plays a role in shaping public perceptions and beliefs.

Furthermore, public trust was shown to have a positive and significant influence on voting decisions, with a coefficient of 0.384, a p-value of 0.000, and a t-statistic of 4.676. These findings confirm that voters' level of trust in regional head candidates contributes significantly to driving voting decisions. Therefore, it can be concluded that social media and public trust are the two main variables that directly influence voting behavior, while e-WOM exerts a stronger influence through the mediating role of public trust.

2) Indirect Effect Hypothesis Test

Indirect Effect Hypothesis Testing is a statistical process used to test the existence and significance of indirect effects between variables in a model.

Table 9. Results of Indirect Effect Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Indirect Influence	Original Sample (O)	T Statistik (| O/STDEV |))	P Values	Desription
H6	Social Media (X1) -> *Public Trust* (Y) -> Decision to Choose (Z)	0,187	3,996	**0,000**	Significant
H7	E-WOM (X2) -> *Public Trust* (Y) -> Decision to Choose (Z)	0,159	3,231	**0,001**	Significant

(Source: Data processing results from PLS 3, 2025)

The analysis results show that social media has a positive and significant indirect effect on voting decisions through public trust, with a path coefficient of 0.187, a p-value of 0.000, and a t-statistic of 3.996. This means that increased social media use can build public trust, which in turn drives voting decisions among Generation Z. A similar finding was found for the E-WOM variable, which had a significant indirect effect on voting decisions through public trust, with a coefficient of 0.159, a p-value of 0.001, and a t-statistic of 3.231.

These findings indicate that although E-WOM does not directly influence voting decisions, its influence remains significant when channeled through public trust. Thus, public trust is a key mediating variable in bridging the influence of social media and E-WOM on voting behavior. Both variables play a role in shaping positive perceptions of regional head candidates, which in turn increases voter confidence in making their political choices.

e. PLS Mediation with the VAF Method

In this study, public trust was tested as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media and e-WOM on the decision to vote for regional head candidates among Generation Z in Makassar City. To assess the form of mediation, the Variance Accounted For (VAF) approach was used as developed by Hair et al. (2013). VAF is calculated by comparing the indirect effect to the total effect, where the VAF value can be interpreted to determine whether there is full, partial, or no mediation.

1) Public Trust Mediation in the Relationship between Social Media and Voting Decisions

The analysis results show that the direct influence of social media on voting decisions is 0.167, while the indirect influence through public trust is 0.076. Thus, the total influence is 0.243. The VAF calculation yields a value of:

$$\mathbf{VAF} = \left(\left| \frac{0,076}{0,243} \right| \right) \times 100\% = 31,28\%$$

This value ranges from 20% to 80%, indicating that public trust partially mediates the relationship between social media and voting decisions. This means that social media still has a direct influence on voting decisions, but some of its influence is channeled through increased public trust.

2) Public Trust Mediation in the Relationship between E-WOM and Voting Decisions

Meanwhile, the direct influence of E-WOM on voting decisions is 0.074, and the indirect influence through public trust is 0.111. The total influence of E-WOM is 0.185, with a VAF of:

$$\mathbf{VAF} = \left(\frac{0,111}{0,185} \right) \times 100\% = 60,00\%$$

The VAF value of 60% also indicates partial mediation. This confirms that public trust plays a significant role in mediating the influence of e-WOM on political decisions, although e-WOM also has a significant direct influence.

2. Discussion

This discussion outlines the results of data analysis obtained through statistical tests, with the aim of examining in depth the relationship between social media, e-WOM, public trust, and voting decisions among Generation Z in the context of the Regional Head Election in Makassar City. The discussion begins by exploring how each variable influences each other, both directly and indirectly, and how public trust acts as a mediating variable in this research model.

a. The Influence of Social Media on Voting Decisions

The analysis results show that social media has a positive and significant influence on voting decisions. This finding demonstrates that social media plays a highly effective role in influencing the political behavior of young voters. In the context of Generation Z, who are highly familiar with digital technology, social media has become a dominant space for socio-political interaction. This finding supports the opinions of Larsson (2017), Smith and Anderson (2018), and Kushin and Yamamoto (2010), who stated that social media is a primary source of political information, influencing the political preferences and behavior of the younger generation.

Theoretically, this finding is consistent with the theory of social influence, which positions social media not only as a means of conveying information but also as a shaper of social norms and collective opinion through online interactions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). However, several previous studies (Boulianne, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2009) note that the influence of social media on voting decisions is contextual and dependent on digital literacy and trust in the information received. Therefore, social media as a political campaign instrument must be managed strategically by considering the credibility of the content and the active participation of voters in political discourse.

b. The Influence of Social Media on Public Trust

Furthermore, social media has also been shown to have a positive and significant impact on public trust. This demonstrates that social media is not merely a one-way communication tool, but rather a platform that can strengthen the relationship between regional head candidates and voters through open and personal two-way interactions. This type of interaction allows for the building of a candidate's credibility and integrity in the public eye. This finding aligns with research by Shah (2024) and David (2022), which states that social media can shape public opinion and strengthen trust in political figures through transparency and information accessibility. In this regard, social media also serves as a platform for building a positive image and demonstrating commitment to public aspirations, as noted by Harris and Harrigan (2015), Kotler and Keller (2016), and Ceron (2017). Therefore, social media is a powerful strategic tool for regional head candidates in building public trust.

c. The Influence of E-WOM on Voting Decisions

However, unlike the influence of social media, e-WOM did not show a significant influence on voting decisions. The small and insignificant path coefficient indicates that the dissemination of information through e-WOM does not directly influence Generation Z's political decisions. This may be due to the high level of skepticism towards information circulating in the digital space without source validation. Generation Z is known to have a tendency to verify information before believing it, so information from e-WOM that is not credible is considered insufficient to influence their political choices. This finding contradicts several previous studies (Liu & Karahanna, 2017), but aligns with Cheung and Thadani (2012) and Zhu and Zhang (2010), which emphasize the importance of source credibility in the effectiveness of e-WOM.

Furthermore, the fact that other factors, such as social media and public trust, are more influential in shaping voting decisions (Aznuriyandi et al., 2024) suggests that regional head candidates should not rely solely on e-WOM as a communication strategy. Research by Valenzuela et al. (2009) showed that social media can increase public trust and voter engagement, which in turn can influence voting decisions. Therefore, it is important for regional head candidates to pay attention to other elements such as building trust and utilizing social media to build stronger relationships with voters.

d. The Effect of E-WOM on Public Trust

Although it doesn't directly influence voting decisions, e-WOM has a positive and significant influence on public trust. This means that e-WOM remains an information channel that can shape public perceptions of regional head candidates if the information conveyed comes from trusted sources and is presented convincingly. This finding aligns with research showing that e-WOM, particularly in the form of online reviews or testimonials, can influence consumer perceptions and trust levels (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Smuts (2010) also suggests that public discourse on social media and digital platforms has the potential to shape trust in products or political figures. Thus, e-WOM plays a crucial role in building credibility and trust, essential for supporting consumer or voter decision-making in the context of regional elections.

E-WOM serves as one of the most powerful forms of social influence in today's digital world, as Sherchan et al. (2013) demonstrates, showing that people tend to trust information received from others through social networks or direct communication more than information from official sources or commercial advertisements. and Smuts (2010). However, the effectiveness of E-WOM in building trust remains highly dependent on the socio-political context and digital literacy of society.

e. The Influence of Public Trust on Voting Decisions

Furthermore, the results of this study also show that public trust significantly influences voting decisions. This indicates that trust is a crucial element in the political decision-making process, especially among Generation Z, who place the values of integrity, transparency, and accountability as primary considerations in selecting leaders. Lengkoan et al. (2022) stated that a high level of public trust can increase political participation and encourage voters to cast their ballots based on confidence in the candidate's integrity.

This finding is supported by Chuang et al. (2013), who stated that trust is a crucial foundation for social cohesion and healthy political interaction. In this context, public trust not only serves as a driver of participation but also as an indicator of a candidate's legitimacy in the eyes of voters.

One reason why public trust significantly influences voting decisions is because it reduces uncertainty in political decision-making. Gao et al. (2022) explain that in an era of rapid information flow often filled with hoaxes and disinformation, voters are more likely to trust information sources they perceive as trustworthy. This public trust forms the basis for voters to rely on information from trusted candidates or parties, which in turn influences their choices. When regional head candidates are able to build strong relationships of trust with the public, they are more likely to gain support in the form of a larger number of votes in elections. Therefore, building and maintaining public trust is a key strategy in modern political campaigns.

f. Indirect Influence of Social Media on Voting Decisions through Public Trust

In terms of indirect influence, social media has been shown to have a significant influence on voting decisions through the mediation of public trust. This indicates that social media's role in influencing political decisions is not solely direct, but also through the formation of perceptions and trust in candidates. In other words, the effectiveness of social media in shaping voting decisions depends heavily on its success in building voter trust in the information and messages conveyed. In line with these findings, research by Bennett (2012) confirms the significant influence of social media in shaping consumer opinions and decisions, including those of voters. The interactions and communications that occur can strengthen trust in the information provided.

Furthermore, Salehan and Kim (2012) stated that trust in social media as an information source is a key factor in influencing decision-makers' attitudes and behavior, including in political contexts. Zhang et al. (2014) also revealed that interactions on social media can increase the credibility of information sources and strengthen voter trust in candidates, which in turn influences their voting decisions.

In the context of regional head elections, these findings underscore the importance for candidates to focus not only on traditional marketing strategies but also on maximizing social media use. Voters, especially Generation Z, are highly connected to digital platforms, and they are more likely to vote for candidates perceived as having high credibility on social media. Therefore, strategic use of social media can help regional head candidates not only build public trust but also encourage voters to make more rational decisions based on strong beliefs about the candidate.

g. Indirect Influence of E-WOM on Voting Decisions through Public Trust

Meanwhile, e-WOM also demonstrates a significant indirect influence on voting decisions through the mediation of public trust. This means that although e-WOM does not directly influence Generation Z's political decisions, information conveyed through e-WOM can shape decisions if it first successfully increases public trust. In this case, public trust serves as a conversion mechanism that transforms the influence of e-WOM into voting decisions.

As Moran and Muzellec (2017) noted, e-WOM can have detrimental effects if the messages disseminated originate from less trustworthy sources or have unclear objectives. Therefore, public trust in the information channels and sources is a crucial element in determining whether e-WOM will have a positive or negative impact on voting decisions.

Iyer et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of trust in strengthening the influence of digital communication on consumer and voter behavior. Therefore, e-WOM-based campaign strategies should focus on increasing source credibility, strengthening positive narratives, and actively engaging online communities with high social influence (influencers and opinion leaders).

Overall, this discussion emphasizes the importance of public trust as a key mediating variable in maximizing the influence of social media and e-WOM on the political decisions of the younger generation. In an increasingly complex digital political ecosystem, understanding the psychological and social mechanisms that shape political decisions is key to designing effective and ethical political communication strategies.

IV. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that social media has a positive and significant influence on voting decisions among Generation Z in Makassar City. The more active voters are in using social media, the more likely they are to base their political decisions on the information available on these digital platforms. Furthermore, social media has also been shown to contribute significantly to building public trust in regional head candidates. High participation and engagement in social media strengthen positive perceptions and increase the candidate's credibility in the eyes of the public.

Conversely, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) does not demonstrate a significant direct influence on voting decisions. Despite being an information channel, e-WOM does not appear to be strong enough to directly shape voter behavior, possibly because not all circulating information is considered relevant or credible. Nevertheless, e-WOM has a significant influence on public trust. Information disseminated through e-WOM can shape opinions and increase public trust in certain figures or issues, thus playing a crucial role in building the image of regional head candidates.

Furthermore, this study confirms that public trust has a positive and significant influence on voting decisions. Voters with a high level of trust in a candidate tend to be more certain in choosing that candidate. In this context, public trust is not merely a supporting element, but rather a determinant factor mediating the relationship between social media and e-WOM on voting decisions. Social media and e-WOM have been shown to indirectly influence voting decisions by increasing public trust. This means that the effectiveness of digital campaigns depends heavily on the ability to build public trust as the primary foundation for influencing voter behavior, particularly among the younger generation in today's digital era.

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