From TikTok to Truth Social: A data analysis of Gen Z's platform preferences
following the 2024 election

by

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Abstract

As social media continues to shape political discourse, Generation Z has emerged as a distinct and influential demographic in U.S. elections. This study explores Gen Z's social media platform usage during the 2024 presidential election and investigates how their political affiliation, gender, and opinions of platform owners relate to their usage habits and concern about misinformation. Using a quantitative approach, original survey data was collected from 188 Gen Z respondents at Kansas State University. Descriptive statistics and paired samples t-tests were conducted to compare usage frequency across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Independent samples t-tests and bivariate correlations were used to assess differences in usage patterns by vote choice, political ideology, and gender.

Results show that TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube were the most frequently used platforms, while Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and emerging platforms like Truth Social and Threads had significantly lower engagement. Liberal-leaning participants reported lower favorability toward platform owners like Elon Musk and Donald Trump, while platform usage varied significantly across gender and political lines. These findings provide insight into the digital behaviors and values that guided Gen Z's media choices in the 2024 election and contribute to a growing understanding of how this generation navigates political information in a fragmented and polarized online ecosystem.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, social media has shifted from a niche networking tool into the primary conduit through which many people consume news, form political opinions, and engage civically (Braghieri et al., 2025; Oxford Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025). This is most evident in Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort born between 1997 and 2012, who have grown up fully immersed in smartphones, algorithmic feeds, and a constant digital presence (Mogaji et al., 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2024). Unlike previous generations that relied on newspapers or broadcast media, Gen Z's information ecosystem revolves around platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) or as it is called in this study "X/Twitter" (Ray, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024).

Recent national data underscores how deeply integrated social platforms have become across all age groups. According to Pew Research Center's 2024 national data, YouTube and Facebook remain the most widely used platforms among U.S. adults overall, with 93% and 69%, respectively, reporting regular use (Pew Research Center, 2024). However, among U.S. teens, 90% use YouTube, followed by approximately 60–63% on TikTok, with Instagram and Snapchat not far behind in popularity (Pew Research Center, 2024). Similarly, among U.S. Gen Z adults (ages 18–29), YouTube (93%), Instagram (76%), Facebook (68%), and Snapchat (65%) dominate usage patterns (Sprout Social, 2024).

These trends reflect a broader generational divergence: while legacy platforms like Facebook remain structurally dominant across the population, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat are clearly more central to Gen Z's everyday digital life.

In the months leading up to the 2024 election and into early 2025, major events—including changes in platform policies, the spread of misinformation, and shifts in platform design—transformed how young voters engaged in online spaces. Elon Musk's management of X/Twitter, Mark Zuckerberg's public stance on free speech and misinformation, and the rising popularity of TikTok under scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers all contributed to the evolving social media environment Gen Z had to navigate. These platforms did not function merely as passive information channels; they served as arenas where politics, entertainment, identity, and algorithmic influence intersected.

Understanding which platforms Gen Z used, why they used them, and how those choices connected to political identity and trust in media is critical for interpreting the role this generation plays in shaping democratic engagement in the digital age. This report explores Gen Z's platform choices during and following the 2024 election, drawing on original survey data collected in early 2025 at Kansas State University. By focusing on self-reported usage, political affiliation, favorability of platform owners, and concerns about misinformation, the study aims to map the attitudes and behaviors that define Gen Z's political engagement online.

Rather than applying a single theoretical framework, this research takes an exploratory and descriptive approach, guided by current debates in media and political communication, and informed by the sociotechnical realities Gen Z experiences daily. The findings offer insight into how this generation negotiates political ideology with platform ownership and interprets the personalities of the people behind the companies behind the apps they use.

Literature Review

Over the last two decades, social media has shifted from a niche social networking tool into the primary conduit through which many people consume news, form political opinions, and engage civically (Braghieri et al., 2025; Oxford Reuters Institute, 2025). This transition is most clearly reflected in the habits of Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort born between 1997 and 2012, whose formative years have been saturated with smartphones, algorithmic feeds, and a 24/7 connection to digital life (Mogaji et al., 2024; Mulyadi et al., 2024). Unlike previous generations who grew up relying on newspapers or television broadcasts for news, Gen Z's information ecosystem revolves around platforms like TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X/Twitter (Ray, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024).

This generational divergence is well-documented. A 2023 study by Ray found that Gen Z is "perhaps the least likely to consume news through traditional media," with online platforms firmly embedded in their daily habits. A report from Pew Research Center (St. Aubin & Liedke, 2024) shows that while only 46% of Americans ages 18–29 say they get news from television, 78% report getting it from social media. Print media is even less trusted among this group, with fewer than 1 in 5 young adults reading newspapers for news. What this data points to is a foundational change in how civic information is accessed and interpreted by Gen Z—through hyper-personalized feeds, short-form videos, and decentralized sources.

Social media emerged in the early 2000s as a social utility—a way to connect, share photos, and exchange ideas in small networks. Platforms like Friendster and MySpace laid the groundwork for more dominant successors like Facebook, which integrated broader functionalities, monetization, and eventually, political advertising (Danah m. boyd et al., 2007). By the early 2010s, the political potential of social media had begun to surface clearly with

global movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (Howard, P. N. et al., 2011; Conover, M. D. et al., 2011). Over the span of the next 10 years though, the tone shifted. What once promised democratization of voice has increasingly raised concerns about polarization, misinformation, surveillance, and manipulation (Mogaji et al., 2024; Knight Foundation, Pt. 1, 2022).

Nowhere are these tensions more visible than in Gen Z's political behavior (Knight Foundation, Pt. 2, 2023). Although they are among the most active and savvy users of digital platforms, Gen Z is also one of the most skeptical. In 2022 the Knight Foundation and Gallup conducted a study that found Gen Z users express significantly lower levels of trust in political content shared via social media compared to older generations, even while they continue to rely on it. This tension underscores a broader trend: while Gen Z remains conflicted and deeply skeptical of social media platforms, particularly regarding ownership, privacy, and institutional influence, they continue to use these tools for political expression and information, navigating their utility with a critical awareness (Gallup & Walton Family Foundation, 2023).

Ownership has become a focal point of political media perception (Kahraman-Gokalp et a., 2022). Elon Musk's acquisition of X/Twitter, Mark Zuckerberg's control of Meta, and Donald Trump's creation of Truth Social have each politicized platform leadership in ways that have not been seen or measured before. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center between Feb. 24-March, 2025 found that after Musk's takeover, Republican users' perceptions of X/Twitter became significantly more positive, while Democratic users' views shifted sharply negative. This highlights how platform leadership can directly affect public trust and political alignment (Pew Research Center, 2025). In a media environment where platform CEOs act as public ideologues, users must increasingly account for not just what content a platform offers,

but who governs the ecosystem itself and what agendas they may serve (Ray, 2023; Helmstetter, 2025).

Despite—or perhaps because of—these issues, social media remains a vital arena for political expression among Gen Z. During the 2024 U.S. election, these platforms were not just used passively but actively shaped political discourse (Stocking, G. et al. 2025). TikTok emerged as a major player in the election information sphere, with creators offering digestible news, opinionated commentary, and activism campaigns in real-time (Pew Research Center, 2024). Instagram stories became a popular format for sharing voting guides, mutual aid resources, and call-to-action posts (American Press Institute, 2024). YouTube, traditionally seen as entertainment-focused, was also leveraged for long-form political breakdowns and live coverage (Mogaji et al., 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024).

This behavior reflects Gen Z's political identity formation, which is more decentralized and performative than in past generations. Social media allows users to signal affiliation, debate issues, and organize digitally—often outside traditional party structures. The lines between civic expression, entertainment, and identity are blurred. Gen Z is also more likely to engage in "ambient participation," where simply liking or resharing political content is seen as a form of engagement (Mulyadi et al., 2024; Al-Qaysi et al., 2020).

Trust, however, remains a conditional factor in this engagement. While traditional news outlets are seen as out of touch or biased, platforms are not exempt from criticism. Transparency in how algorithms work, how political content is moderated, and how misinformation is flagged plays a growing role in Gen Z's platform preferences. As platforms become extensions of one's personal brand, their perceived integrity becomes increasingly consequential. Al-Qaysi et al.

(2020) argue that trust in platforms acts as a gatekeeping force—if a user suspects manipulation or partisan bias, they may disengage regardless of the platform's reach or usability.

While frameworks like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) have been used in prior research to explore digital adoption behaviors (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), they fall short in capturing the cultural and political undercurrents driving Gen Z's media usage. Concepts such as Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use remain relevant, but Gen Z's platform choices are influenced just as much by political alignment, peer validation, and ethical considerations as by usability metrics (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020; Mohamad-Nordin et al., 2020). While TAM may provide a foundation for understanding the mechanics of adoption, it cannot fully explain the broader values and social pressures guiding Gen Z's online behaviors.

Prior research has documented consistent gender-based differences in social media usage patterns. Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) found that young adult females were more likely than males to use social networking sites for relationship maintenance, academic purposes, and following agendas, while males were more likely to use them for making new connections. These differences were statistically significant, indicating that gender is an important variable in understanding the motivations behind social media engagement.

A national survey performed by the Pew Research Center (2024) found that Gen Z teen girls were more likely than boys to report using TikTok almost constantly (19% vs. 13%), whereas boys were more likely to use YouTube almost constantly (19% vs. 11%). Daily usage patterns follow a similar trend, with girls reporting higher use of TikTok (66% vs. 59%) and Instagram (66% vs. 56%), and boys showing higher daily use of YouTube (93% vs. 87%). These findings highlight measurable gender differences in platform engagement among teens but do not indicate differences in the specific types of content consumed.

Research indicates that Gen Z remains highly active on social media but reports lower trust in political content compared to older generations, according to a Gallup study commissioned by the Walton Family Foundation (2023). Trust functions as a gatekeeping factor for engagement, with perceived bias or manipulation reducing willingness to interact with online content (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020). Additional studies point to broad concerns about misinformation and algorithmic influence in shaping digital experiences, suggesting skepticism toward online information is widespread among younger users (Knight Foundation, 2023; Mogaji et al., 2024). also indicates that Gen Z remains both active on social media and cautious about the accuracy of information they consume.

Building on this body of research, the present study aims to extend current knowledge by examining how gender differences, political ideology, vote choice, and perceptions of platform ownership intersect to shape digital engagement among Gen Z. While prior studies have examined generational shifts in media consumption and gendered patterns of use, few have integrated measures of trust in platform leadership alongside usage frequency and misinformation concern. By combining these factors, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Gen Z navigates politically charged digital spaces—offering empirical evidence to debates on the role of gender, ideology, and trust in shaping civic participation online.

Research Questions

RQ1: Which social media platforms did Gen Z report using most often during the 2024 election cycle?

RQ1a: Are there any statistically significant differences between Gen Z's use of various social media platforms for political information during the 2024 election cycle?

RQ2: What is the relationship between social media platform use and vote choice?

RQ3: To what extent does Gen Z's political ideology relate to their opinions of social media platform owners (e.g., Musk, Zuckerberg, Trump)?

RQ4: How does social media use differ by gender?

RQ5: Which type of Misinformation is Gen Z most concerned with?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey designed to examine how members of Gen Z used social media to engage with political information during the 2024 United States presidential election cycle and early 2025. The primary goal was to explore Gen Z's platform preferences, patterns of use, trust levels, political ideologies, and attitudes toward platform ownership and misinformation. The research focused on descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, paired-samples t-tests, and independent-samples t-tests to analyze relationships between key variables.

Participants

Participants were recruited from public speaking courses at a major midwestern research university. To be eligible, respondents had to self-identify as members of Generation Z—defined here as individuals born between 1997 and 2012—and be between the ages of 18 and 27 at the time of participation. A total of 217 responses were received. After cleaning the data to remove incomplete responses or those outside the age eligibility criteria, 188 valid cases were retained for analysis.

Instrumentation

The survey consisted of multiple sections that measured participants' social media usage frequency, political engagement on platforms, trust in platform content, opinions of platform owners, and concerns about misinformation. Most survey items used 7-point Likert-type ordinal scales. For example, platform usage frequency ranged from 1 ("Don't use this platform") to 7

("Multiple times per hour"), while trust in information was measured from 1 ("Not at all trustworthy") to 7 ("Extremely trustworthy"). Additional questions asked about political ideology (from "Extremely liberal" to "Extremely conservative"), time spent on social media, and demographic information. The favorability of platform owners (e.g., Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg) was measured using a 7-point scale from 1 ("Very unfavorable") to 7 ("Very favorable").

Procedures

After receiving IRB approval (IRB #12479), the survey was administered using Qualtrics and distributed via email to students enrolled in public speaking courses. Data collection took place between February 24 and March 24 during the Spring 2025 semester. Respondents were provided with a consent form at the beginning of the survey that explained the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize platform usage and attitudes. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare differences in usage between specific platforms. Bivariate correlations were used to assess the relationship between political ideology and opinions of platform owners, as well as the relationship between time spent on social media and concern for misinformation. Independent samples t-tests were performed to evaluate differences in platform use by gender. Only results with statistically significant findings ($p < .05$) were reported in full, with accompanying means, standard deviations, t-values, and

degrees of freedom. Non-significant findings were summarized to provide context and nuance in interpreting Gen Z's digital political behavior.

Findings

These findings were guided by five research questions that were each aimed at understanding different dimensions of how members of Gen Z engage with and perceive social media in the context of political communication and civic life. The sample (N = 188) had an average age of 19.77 years (SD = 1.72), representing a primarily college-aged Gen Z demographic. Gender identity was majority female (53.7%), followed by male (43.6%), with small proportions identifying as non-binary/third gender (1.1%), agender (0.5%), and genderqueer (1.0%).

In terms of political ideology, 3.2% of respondents identified as extremely conservative, 26.6% as conservative, 17.0% as slightly conservative, while 11.7% identified as slightly liberal, 14.9% as liberal and 6.9% as extremely liberal. A further 19.7% described themselves as moderate. Regarding the 2024 U.S. presidential election, 42.6% reported voting for Donald J. Trump, 35.1% for Kamala D. Harris, 17.0% indicated they did not vote, and 4.8% reported voting for an independent or other candidate.

RQ1: Which social media platforms did Gen Z report using most often?

Descriptive-statistics procedures (Frequencies → Statistics → Mean, SD) were run for 10 social media platforms. Table 1 summarizes the full distribution; key findings are described below.

Platform	Don't Use	Rarely	Weekly	Once/Day	Multi/Day	Hourly	Multi/Hour	Mean	SD
Snapchat	6.4%	4.8%	4.3%	12.2%	20.7%	12.8%	37.8%	5.28	1.83
Instagram	3.7%	6.9%	6.4%	12.8%	51.1%	5.3%	13.3%	4.71	1.46
TikTok	22.9%	5.9%	2.7%	4.8%	32.4%	8.5%	22.3%	4.34	2.22
YouTube	8.5%	19.1%	23.9%	25.5%	17.0%	1.6%	4.3%	3.45	1.45
Facebook	35.1%	34.0%	9.6%	8.5%	12.2%	0%	0.5%	2.31	1.39
X/Twitter	51.1%	20.7%	8.0%	8.0%	9.6%	1.6%	1.1%	2.13	1.51
Yik Yak	47.9%	20.7%	16.5%	9.6%	2.1%	0.5%	2.1%	2.07	1.36
Threads	88.8%	7.4%	2.1%	0.5%	0%	0%	0%	1.13	0.44
BlueSky	96.3%	1.1%	1.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0.37	0.00
Truth Social	98.9%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.00	0.00

Table 1. Social media usage distribution by platform

Note: Platforms are ranked from most used to least used by mean.

High-frequency, visual-first platforms

Snapchat had a large majority of respondents reporting heavy use "multiple times per hour" (37.8%) and "multiple times per day" (20.7%). Fewer than one-in-ten (9%) said they "rarely" or "never" used the app. Overall frequency was very high, M = 5.28, SD = 1.83, indicating that Snapchat is embedded in Gen Z's daily routines. Instagram had more than half of participants (51.1%) said they checked Instagram "multiple times per day," with an additional 18.6% accessing at least once per hour. Only 3.7% reported never using the platform. This produced a high overall mean, M = 4.71, SD = 1.46. TikTok usage was also heavy with

respondents reporting 32.4% "multiple times per day" and 30.8% at least once per hour. Roughly one-quarter (22.9%) reported no use, yielding M = 4.34, SD = 2.22. YouTube. Although not as incessantly checked, YouTube was a daily habit: 25.5% "once per day" and 17.0% "multiple times per day," with an additional 23.9% weekly viewers (M = 3.45, SD = 1.45).

Low-to-moderate-frequency platforms

One-third of Gen Z respondents (35.1%) did not use Facebook at all and another 34.0% used it only "rarely." Daily use remained modest (20.7% combined). Overall frequency was low, M = 2.31, SD = 1.39. X/Twitter had a slim majority (51.1%), reported no use; daily or greater use totaled just 12.3 %. The platform's mean frequency—M = 2.13, SD = 1.51—was similar to Facebook's. Yik Yak had nearly half (47.9%) never used the hyperlocal app, with another 20.7% "rarely." Daily use was limited to 12.2%, reflected in a low mean of 2.07 (SD = 1.36).

Minimal-use or emerging platforms

Threads had (88.8%) that had not adopted Meta's text app, and only 0.5% used it daily (M = 1.13, SD = 0.44). Bluesky's usage was similar with 96.3% reporting no use; mean frequency was 1.05 (SD = 0.37). Lastly, for Truth Social the entire sample (98.9%) reported no use of the platform, producing a floor-level mean of 1.00 (SD = 0.00). Gen Z's media usage centered on mobile, visually rich platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, with each logging mean scores above the scale midpoint and large standard deviations that highlight intense, habitual use among heavy users. In contrast, legacy text-centric platforms (Facebook, X/Twitter) and most emerging or politically niche services (Threads, Bluesky, Truth Social) registered minimal engagement.

RQ1a: Are there statistically significant differences between Gen Z's social media use for political information during the 2024 election cycle?

To examine differences in usage frequency across platforms, a series of paired-samples t-tests were conducted comparing every possible platform pairing. A one-way repeated-measures ANOVA could have been used to test for overall differences, but with the way that the dataet was structured and given that the research question was focused on identifying specific pairwise differences between platforms, paired t-tests were selected as the most suitable. This approach allowed for comparison of how each platform's use for political information related to every other platform, rather than anchoring comparisons to a single baseline.

Participants reported significantly more frequent use of Instagram ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.45$) than Facebook ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(186) = -18.40$, $p < .05$. Similarly, Snapchat ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.83$) was used significantly more than Facebook, $t(185) = -20.52$, $p < .05$, and TikTok ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.22$) was also preferred over Facebook, $t(186) = -12.03$, $p < .05$. Other platforms such as YouTube ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.44$) also outpaced Facebook in usage, $t(187) = -7.77$, $p < .05$. Instagram consistently ranked among the most-used platforms for political information. Compared to X/Twitter ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.48$), Instagram was used significantly more, $t(186) = 17.69$, $p < .05$. Instagram also saw higher use than Yik Yak ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(185) = 20.45$, $p < .05$, and YouTube, $t(186) = 7.87$, $p < .05$.

Snapchat was another standout, significantly surpassing TikTok ($t(185) = 6.21$, $p < .05$), Yik Yak ($t(185) = 22.32$, $p < .05$), and Threads ($t(184) = 29.48$, $p < .05$). These findings emphasize Snapchat's central role in political discourse for this demographic. Notably, all

mainstream platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube) significantly outpaced emerging or niche platforms such as Threads (M = 1.13, SD = 0.44), Truth Social (M = 1.00, SD = 0.00), and Bluesky (M = 1.05, SD = 0.37), with t values ranging from 11.47 to 34.58, all statistically significant at p < .05.

In contrast, non-significant differences were observed between Facebook and X/Twitter (t(187) = 1.20, p > .05), Facebook and Yik Yak (t(186) = 1.80, p > .05), Instagram and TikTok (t(185) = 2.45, p > .05), and Threads vs. Bluesky (t(185) = 1.87, p > .05). These non-significant findings suggest closer alignment in usage patterns among these pairs. Overall, Gen Z's platform use during the 2024 election cycle clearly favored visually immersive, algorithm-driven platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok over text-centric or politically polarized platforms. These results offer insight into where this demographic is most likely to encounter and engage with political information online.

	FB	IG	X	SC	TT	YY	YT	TD	TS	BSY
FB	–	IG*	*ns*	SC*	*	*ns*	YT*	FB*	FB*	FB*
IG	IG*	–	IG*	SC*	*ns*	IG*	IG*	IG*	IG*	IG*
X	*ns*	IG*	–	SC*	*	X*	YT*	X*	X*	X*
SC	SC*	SC*	SC*	–	SC*	SC*	SC*	SC*	SC*	SC*
TT	TT*	*ns*	TT*	SC*	–	TT*	TT*	TT*	TT*	TT*
YY	*ns*	IG*	*ns*	SC*	TT*	–	YT*	YY*	YY*	YY*
YT	YT*	IG*	YT*	SC*	TT*	YT*	–	YT*	YT*	YT*
TD	FB*	IG*	X*	SC*	TT*	YY*	YT*	–	TD*	*ns*
TS	FB*	IG*	X*	SC*	TT*	YY*	YT*	TD*	–	*ns*
BSY	FB*	IG*	X*	SC*	TT*	YY*	YT*	*ns*	*ns*	–

Table 2. Summary of pairwise t-tests for Gen Z social media usage for political information

Note: For significant column variables, the * indicates statistical significance, the shorthand (FB/IG/X...) indicates which is used more.

RQ2: What is the relationship between social media platform use and candidate choice?

To determine whether social media platform usage differed by vote choice in the 2024 election, independent-samples t-tests were conducted comparing respondents who reported voting for Kamala Harris versus those who voted for Donald Trump. Each t-test examined differences in frequency of use for a specific platform.

Among the Gen Z respondents surveyed, 42.6% reported voting for Donald J. Trump, while 35.6% voted for Kamala D. Harris in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Additionally, 17.0% indicated they did not vote, and 4.8% reported voting for an independent or other candidate. These percentages describe the self-reported choices of the sample and provide context for the comparisons made between groups.

A statistically significant difference emerged for Snapchat usage. Trump voters reported using Snapchat more frequently (M = 5.81, SD = 1.79) than Harris voters (M = 4.59, SD = 1.88), t(143) = 3.97, p < .001. This suggests that Snapchat may play a more prominent role in the digital lives of conservative-leaning Gen Z users, although further research would be needed to assess content type and political messaging on the platform.

Yik Yak approached statistical significance, with Trump voters showing slightly higher usage (M = 2.37, SD = 1.46) than Harris voters (M = 1.96, SD = 1.27), t(143) = 1.78, p = .077. Though not statistically significant, this difference may be explained by the platform's hyperlocal and anonymous design, which has gained traction among college subcultures such as

Greek life—demographics that may align more closely with conservative social circles. No other

platforms demonstrated significant differences in usage based on vote choice.[1]

These findings in this survey suggest that platform preferences were largely consistent

across partisan lines, except for Snapchat, where Trump voters reported significantly more

frequent use. The lack of broader significant differences indicates that while Gen Z students may

be ideologically polarized in political beliefs, their patterns of platform use during the 2024

election cycle were generally similar across voting groups. In other words, all of Gen Z uses

these platforms to a similar extent, regardless of their political vote choice.

RQ3: To what extent does Gen Z's political ideology relate to their opinions of

social media platform owners?

To explore the relationship between Gen Z's political ideology and their opinions of

major social media platform owners, bivariate Pearson correlations were conducted between

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[1] Facebook: Trump M = 2.38 (SD = 1.42), Harris M = 2.29 (SD = 1.37), t(143) = 0.43, p = .67

Instagram: Trump M = 4.53 (SD = 1.48), Harris M = 4.74 (SD = 1.42), t(143) = -0.78, p = .44

X/Twitter: Trump M = 2.42 (SD = 1.73), Harris M = 2.09 (SD = 1.42), t(143) = 1.16, p = .25

TikTok: Trump M = 4.08 (SD = 2.40), Harris M = 4.45 (SD = 2.16), t(143) = -0.92, p = .36

YouTube: Trump M = 3.69 (SD = 1.52), Harris M = 3.39 (SD = 1.39), t(143) = 1.18, p = .24

Threads: Trump M = 1.15 (SD = 0.45), Harris M = 1.13 (SD = 0.43), t(143) = 0.31, p = .76

Truth Social: Trump M = 1.02 (SD = 0.14), Harris M = 1.00 (SD = 0.00), t(143) = 1.38, p = .17

Bluesky: Trump M = 1.10 (SD = 0.47), Harris M = 1.03 (SD = 0.34), t(143) = 1.10, p = .27

participants' self-reported ideology (ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative) and their favorability ratings of platform owners, such as Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Donald Trump, Evan Spiegel and Shou Zi Chew.

Participants were asked to rate their political ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from "Extremely liberal" to "Extremely conservative." Based on the self-reported political ideology of respondents in this study, the distribution was as follows: 6.9% identified as Extremely liberal, 14.9% as Liberal, and 11.7% as Slightly liberal, totaling 33.5% of participants leaning liberal. Additionally, 19.7% identified as Moderate. On the conservative end of the spectrum, 17.0% identified as Slightly conservative, 26.6% as Conservative, and 3.2% as Extremely conservative, comprising 46.8% of respondents with some level of conservative orientation. This breakdown indicates a primarily conservative-leaning sample, although moderates and liberals also represented substantial portions of the Gen Z participants surveyed.

Favorability Ratings and Correlations with Ideology

Participants were also asked to rate their favorability of various platform owners on a 7-point scale. Below are the means, standard deviations, and correlations with political ideology.

Platform Owner	Platform	M	SD	r with Ideology	Sig. (2-tailed)
Elon Musk	X/Twitter	3.05	2.09	–.75	< .001
Mark Zuckerberg	FB/IG/Thread	3.72	1.54	–.44	< .001
Donald Trump	Truth Social	1.88	1.32	–.78	< .001
Evan Spiegel	Snapchat	4.00	1.22	–.18	< .05
Shou Zi Chew	TikTok	4.48	1.09	–.008	.914

Table 3. Correlation between Gen Z political ideology and favorability toward social media platform owners

Note: Higher values indicate greater favorability toward the platform owner (1 = Strongly unfavorable, 7 = Strongly favorable). Negative correlation coefficients (r) suggest that as respondents lean more liberal, their favorability decreases. Statistically significant correlations appear for Musk, Zuckerberg, Trump, and Spiegel.

The results show that more liberal Gen Z participants held significantly less favorable opinions of platform owners known for their conservative views or controversial actions. Specifically:

A strong negative correlation was observed between political ideology and favorability toward Elon Musk, r = –.75, p < .001. As participants reported being more liberal, their opinion of Musk was more negative.

A similarly strong negative correlation emerged for Donald Trump, r = –.78, p < .001, indicating that liberals expressed very low favorability toward the owner of Truth Social. However, a key contradiction emerged from how conservatives voted versus how they use Truth Social. Despite Donald Trump receiving the most votes among Gen Z respondents in this sample (42.6%), favorability toward him as a platform owner remained extremely low (M = 1.88), and usage of Truth Social was minimal among conservatives.

This discrepancy suggests that political support does not automatically translate to platform adoption or owner favorability. Opinions of Mark Zuckerberg, owner of Facebook, Instagram, and Threads, were moderately negative among liberals (r = –.44, p < .001).

For Evan Spiegel, Snapchat's CEO, there was a negative correlation (r = –.18, p < .05). Shou Zi Chew, CEO of TikTok, had a high average favorability rating (M = 4.48, SD = 1.09), but the correlation between ideology and opinion was negligible and not statistically significant, r = –.008, p = .914.

Despite lacking awareness of TikTok's CEO (who remains relatively anonymous to many users), Gen Z rated TikTok highly in daily use and showed neutral to positive views of Chew. This lack of correlation may suggest that platform usage and owner recognition are not always connected.

These findings reveal that the more liberal participants reported being, the more negatively they viewed politically polarizing figures like Elon Musk and Donald Trump. Conversely, opinions of less politically vocal or lesser-known CEOs such as Shou Zi Chew and Evan Spiegel were either more moderate or unrelated to ideology. These results suggest an ideological filter through which Gen Z liberals evaluate platform leadership, with political alignment heavily influencing brand sentiment.

However, platform usage patterns and favorability toward leadership do not always align with political behavior. A key contradiction emerged in the case of Donald Trump: despite receiving the highest share of votes among Gen Z respondents in this sample, Trump's favorability as a platform owner remained the lowest. This suggests that even politically aligned users may reject platforms like Truth Social due to other factors—such as limited utility, weak social presence, or poor brand relevance—beyond the ideological reputation of the owner.

Similarly, TikTok was widely used and positively rated, even though participants expressed no strong opinion about its CEO. Taken together, these results highlight that platform adoption is shaped by a complex interplay of ideology, usability, peer influence, and brand perception—not just political alignment with platform leadership.

RQ4: How Does Social Media Use Differ by Gender?

To determine whether Gen Z's usage of specific social media platforms differed by gender, independent samples t-tests were conducted comparing self-reported frequency of platform use between men and women. Of the 188 valid survey respondents, 59.6% identified as female (n = 112), 39.4% as male (n = 74), and 1.1% identified as nonbinary, agender, or genderqueer (n = 2). Given the small number of gender-diverse respondents, the analysis for this research question focused on binary gender categories (male and female) to ensure adequate sample sizes for statistical comparison. While most platforms showed no statistically significant differences, three platforms—X/Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube—revealed meaningful gender-based usage gaps.
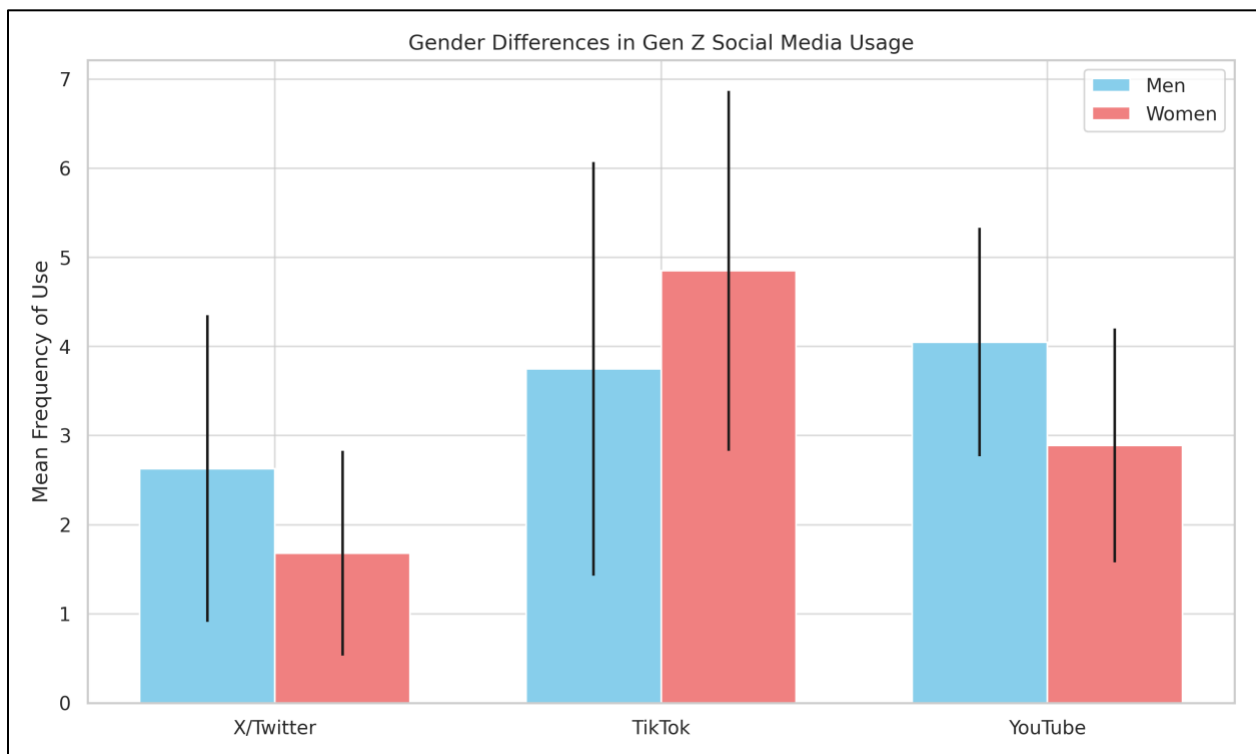

Figure 1. Gender differences in Gen Z Social Media Usage

Figure 1. *Gender differences in Gen Z social media platform usage*

Note. Mean usage frequency scores for men and women on X/Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. Independent-samples t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between genders on all three platforms: X/Twitter and YouTube were used more frequently by men, while TikTok was used more frequently by women ($p < .001$ for all comparisons). Usage was measured on a 7-point scale from 1 = "Don't use this platform" to 7 = "Use multiple times per hour."

First, X/Twitter usage was significantly higher among men (M = 2.63, SD = 1.72) than women (M = 1.68, SD = 1.15), t(188) = 4.44, $p < .001$. This suggests that men in the sample were more likely to use X/Twitter for daily or weekly content engagement compared to their female counterparts. In contrast, TikTok usage was significantly higher among women (M = 4.85, SD = 2.02) than men (M = 3.75, SD = 2.32), t(188) = –3.41, $p < .001$. This aligns with the survey performed by the Pew Research Center (2024) that reported girls as having a higher use of TikTok (66% vs. 59%).

Finally, YouTube was used more frequently by men (M = 4.05, SD = 1.28) than women (M = 2.89, SD = 1.31), t(188) = 5.99, $p < .001$. This substantial difference may reflect gendered media preferences, with men reporting greater engagement in long-form video content or creator-driven content commonly found on YouTube. Other platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YikYak, Threads, Truth Social, and Bluesky—did not show statistically significant gender-based differences in usage frequency.

These results suggest that while much of Gen Z's social media engagement is similar across genders, key distinctions remain in the types of platforms preferred. Men appear more active on X/Twitter and YouTube, both of which emphasize information exchange and video content. Meanwhile, TikTok continues to resonate more with women, reinforcing its role as a socially immersive and expressive platform. These usage patterns could inform future political messaging, influencer strategies, or content delivery formats targeting gender-specific Gen Z subgroups.

RQ5: Which type of Misinformation is Gen Z most concerned with?

To identify which types of misinformation concern Gen Z the most, participants were asked to rate their level of concern on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all concerned, 7 = Extremely concerned) across ten common misinformation categories related to political and digital media. Descriptive statistics were used to rank their responses by mean level of concern.

The results reveal that "concern about misinformation during the election" received the highest average rating (M = 6.11, SD = 1.22), indicating that election-related misinformation was the most pressing issue for Gen Z respondents. This was followed closely by concern about misleading political ads (M = 5.98, SD = 1.30) and not knowing whom to trust online (M = 5.92, SD = 1.27).

Other notable concerns included fake news on social media (M = 5.91), deepfakes or AI-generated misinformation (M = 5.86), and lack of media literacy among peers (M = 5.77). Lower (but still relatively high) levels of concern were expressed about algorithm-driven content bubbles (M = 5.68), bias in cable news (M = 5.64), clickbait or sensational headlines (M = 5.52), and partisan influencers (M = 5.40).

These findings demonstrate that Gen Z is highly aware of the risks posed by both technologically advanced forms of misinformation (e.g., AI-generated content) and more traditional forms (e.g., biased media and political ads). The elevated concern across all categories suggests that Gen Z holds a broad and nuanced understanding of misinformation, with particular emphasis on its implications for elections and trustworthiness online.

Item Description	Mean	SD
Concern about misinformation during the election	6.11	1.22
Concern about misleading political ads	5.98	1.30
Concern about not knowing whom to trust online	5.92	1.27
Concern about fake news on social media	5.91	1.29
Concern about deepfakes or AI-generated misinformation	5.86	1.34
Concern about lack of media literacy among peers	5.77	1.33
Concern about algorithm-driven content bubbles	5.68	1.36
Concern about bias in cable news	5.64	1.44
Concern about clickbait or sensational headlines	5.52	1.41
Concern about partisan influencers	5.40	1.49

Table 4. Summary of Gen Z's concern about misinformation across media contexts

Note: This table displays the mean scores and standard deviations for Gen Z participants' self-reported levels of concern regarding various forms of misinformation, measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all concerned, 7 = Extremely concerned). Overall, participants expressed consistently high concern across all items, reflecting widespread awareness of misinformation issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

This report set out to better understand how Gen Z interacted with social media during and after a highly consequential moment in American politics: the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Through a quantitative survey of 188 college-aged respondents, the study explored platform preferences, political and ideological influences, gender-based usage patterns, trust in platform owners, and attitudes toward misinformation. Taken together, these findings illuminate the complex relationship Gen Z has with digital platforms—not only as tools for communication and self-expression, but as contested spaces for civic engagement, identity formation, and political discourse.

Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube emerged as the most frequently used platforms among respondents, reflecting Gen Z's strong preference for mobile-first, image and video-centric apps. These platforms exemplify the defining features of Web 2.0—a phase of the internet focused on user-generated content, participatory culture, and algorithmic curation (Murugesan, 2007). However, Gen Z's platform preferences suggest they are not just participants in Web 2.0 but active shapers of digital norms, expecting constant innovation, visual immersion, and responsiveness from social technologies.

In contrast, older text-based platforms like Facebook and X/Twitter, along with newer ideologically charged entrants such as Truth Social and Bluesky, saw significantly lower engagement, especially from liberal-leaning individuals. These usage patterns not only mirror broader generational trends but signal a growing divergence in how different age groups experience and trust digital spaces.

Political ideology also played a crucial role in how respondents viewed platform leadership. Liberal-leaning Gen Z users reported significantly lower favorability toward Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and Mark Zuckerberg. These findings suggest that Gen Z's political awareness extends beyond content to include corporate governance and ownership structures— highlighting a part of a generation that evaluates platforms not only for their utility but also for their alignment with perceived ethical and political values.

Yet, a striking contradiction emerged in the data: while Donald Trump received the highest share of votes in this survey's sample—more than Kamala Harris or any other option— respondents simultaneously rated him the least favorable platform owner. Despite Truth Social being his platform, few Gen Z users reported using it, and most rated it unfavorably. This contradiction implies that platform rejection is not solely dictated by political alignment. Even among those who voted for Trump, Truth Social may lack relevance, usability, or peer-driven appeal—suggesting that practical utility and cultural presence can override partisan loyalty in Gen Z's digital behaviors.

Gender differences were also evident in usage patterns. Women reported higher engagement with TikTok, a platform known for short-form storytelling and social commentary, while men used YouTube and X/Twitter more frequently. These differences may reflect divergent content preferences, digital habits, or comfort levels with platform culture. The implication for political communication strategies is clear: successful outreach must be sensitive to platform-specific and gender-informed engagement styles.

Notably, concern about misinformation was high across the board, regardless of time spent on social media. This suggests that Gen Z's awareness of digital manipulation, algorithmic bias, and disinformation has become a baseline cultural competency. Despite their deep

immersion in digital platforms, Gen Z respondents did not display complacency; rather, their responses indicate a generation that is both digitally fluent and critically aware.

In sum, this study adds to the growing body of research positioning Gen Z as a discerning and politically aware digital generation. Their engagement with social media is marked by high-frequency use, critical evaluation of platform ownership, and consistent concern for misinformation. However, their behaviors also show that political alignment alone does not dictate platform use or brand sentiment. These patterns not only reflect Gen Z's lived digital reality but also offer a preview of the values, expectations, and contradictions that will shape the next evolution of the internet.

Limitations and Considerations

While this study offers valuable insight into Gen Z's social media behaviors during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sample consisted of 188 college-aged respondents, most of whom were drawn from a university setting. This limits generalizability, as the findings may not reflect the behaviors and attitudes of non-college Gen Z individuals, those in different geographic regions, or those with varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data for both platform usage and political engagement. While self-report surveys are a common and effective research method, they are susceptible to recall bias and social desirability bias. Participants may have over- or under-reported their usage of certain platforms or their concern about misinformation to align with perceived social norms.

Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of attitudes and behaviors during a highly specific period, following the 2024 U.S. presidential election in the Spring of 2025. While this moment offers a rich context for analysis, it also means that findings may not hold during other times of the year, when respondents responding to questions following an election year.

Fourth and finally, while concern about misinformation was consistently high, this measure captured respondents' perceptions rather than objective verification of their knowledge or susceptibility. It is possible that some participants expressed concern without actively engaging in behaviors that mitigate exposure to misinformation (e.g., fact-checking, diversifying news sources). Taken together, these limitations underscore why these findings can't be generalized but they nonetheless offer valuable insights into a sample of increasing importance and interest.

Recommendations

Future research should continue monitoring how Gen Z perceives platform ownership, especially following notable shifts in leadership dynamics. One relevant example is the public "breakup" between Elon Musk and Donald Trump in June 2025 (Duffy & O'Kruk, 2025). It remains worth investigating whether liberal-leaning Gen Z users continue to hold significantly unfavorable views of these figures, or whether perceptions shift as media narratives evolve and platforms attempt to rebrand or politically reposition.

Additionally, researchers and platform developers should consider how Gen Z's digital values may drive the transition toward Web 3.0—a new internet framework grounded in decentralization, data ownership, and algorithmic transparency. This study found evidence of widespread skepticism toward corporate control, concern about misinformation, and a desire for authenticity—traits that align with Web 3.0 principles.

As Gen Z gains influence, their behaviors may accelerate the adoption of systems that offer greater autonomy and resist top-down control. Evaluating the potential of decentralized content moderation, user-owned data models, and transparent verification tools could help align emerging platforms with the expectations of this generation.

Gen Z's digital fluency and critical engagement with platforms position them not only as users but as key architects of the internet's next era.

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Appendix A - IRB Approval Form

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Jacob Groshek   Proposal Number: IRB-12479
            AQ Miller School of Media and Communication

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
            Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 02/03/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Gen Z's Social Media Choices in the 2024 Election: The Impact of Platform Owners' Personalities."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written – and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category:Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 02/03/2025 12:58 PM ET