

Navigating Electorate Landscape and Building Resilient Digital Ecosystem: Educational Blueprint for Student Voters

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Abstract

This study critically examines the transformative role of social media in shaping electoral behavior from different colleges at the University of Batangas against the backdrop of the global disinformation crisis. It interrogates how digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube influence political narratives, propagate misinformation, and drive voter polarization. The research aims to (1) analyze students' perceptions of social media's impact on electoral attitudes, (2) evaluate the persuasive role of influencers and paid political content, and (3) design evidence-based interventions to foster informed civic engagement and digital literacy. The study employed a simple random sampling design to ensure comprehensive representation of the university's academic landscape. Each college was treated as a distinct stratum reflecting its disciplinary configuration from which respondents were randomly selected to achieve proportional allocation and reduce sampling bias. Anchored in a descriptive quantitative research design, the study utilized a self-administered structured survey instrument as the sole data collection method. Quantitative data were subjected to statistical analysis to identify patterns, distributions, and associative tendencies characterizing youth political behavior within digitally mediated environments. Findings reveal that respondents exhibit moderate awareness of influencer impact yet demonstrate high recognition of the polarizing effects of sponsored political advertisements, underscoring both critical consciousness and the susceptibility of digital electorates to strategic messaging. Building on these findings, the study introduces innovative, community-centered interventions including infographics, slide presentation and documentary video that operationalize digital resilience and responsible engagement. These outputs exemplify a research model that bridges academic inquiry with practical societal impact, fostering students' critical thinking, digital literacy, and democratic participation. The study highlights the imperative of integrating educational frameworks with cutting-edge digital strategies to cultivate discerning and civically engaged electorates in the contemporary information age.

Keywords: Educational Research; Electoral Behavior; Digital Resilience; Quantitative Approach; Philippines

Introduction

Across the globe, digital media has redefined how people encounter political information. As online platforms become central to public discourse, researchers from various regions have raised alarms over the accelerating spread of misinformation and disinformation—phenomena that are steadily weakening democratic systems and influencing how citizens form political opinions. This global pattern underscores a shared vulnerability: as social media becomes the dominant source of information, political decisions are increasingly influenced not by verified facts but by targeted manipulation, digital propaganda, and persuasive emotional messaging. Within this global context, the Philippines has emerged as a critical epicenter, long dubbed the social media capital of the world due to its exceptionally high engagement across platforms.

Cadayday et.al. (2024) reported that a lot of Filipinos are exposed to information online but do not know how to utilize it properly. Many take content at face value, especially from TikTok, YouTube, or Facebook. Some voters feel powerless or disengaged, while others vote based on false narratives. GMA News Research (2022) concluded that Generation Z, 12 to 27 years of age, is more active with social media than the previous generations. They spend time conversing with factors like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. 81% of Filipino Gen Zs use social media more than other platforms, which indicates their preference for social media as a means of communication. Further surveys found around 41 million Gen Zs in the Philippines, which accounts for 38% of the entire population based on the latest 2020 census by the Philippine Statistics Authority. The voting-age Filipino Gen Z aged 18 to 27 had 13 million registered voters in the 2022 election, constituting 20% of the total registered population.

Hence, the researcher believed that many elections are still driven by name recall or popularity, not platforms or qualifications. Already addicted to social media, Filipinos became more deeply immersed in the internet due to the pandemic. For over half a decade now, Filipinos have topped the rest of the world in terms of time spent on the internet and social media. This level of immersion in digital media further deepened during the pandemic after quarantine restrictions forced people to study and work remotely. Most of the respondents in Rappler's surveys have been using social media more because of the pandemic. The majority (60%) said they've been spending more than 4 hours on social media a day since the pandemic. Only 18% claimed to have already been spending the same amount of time on social media prior to the pandemic. At least one in three Filipino internet users is relatively new to the digital environment, making them less familiar with how online systems function and more susceptible to disinformation and various forms of online manipulation (Gavilan et al., 2022).

Article One (2020) confirmed that political disinformation can impact users' rights to free expression, access to information, and political participation. The study aimed to look at the human rights risks in Meta's platforms—Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and address them through global policies and standards. The consulting agency further noted that disinformation was being used to influence voter perceptions and target political opponents. This is also aligned with this study claiming that digital or online campaigning is now a pivotal part of political strategy, aside from the usual machinery of TV, radio and print advertisements, unlike in previous elections. This practice was performed by candidates from the barangay to the national level across the country.

As a result, it affects the quality of voting behavior and weakens the democratic process. Thus, this action research is initially conceived to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between social media usage and the development of political beliefs among voters. It investigates the depth, mechanisms, and consequences of how social media shapes political thinking and polarization and develops mitigation strategies for a more informed electorate. It also investigates the extent to which media consumption

influences political division, the factors that contribute to biased information dissemination, and its implications for democratic processes and civic engagement. It explores how specific platforms contribute to political polarization by measuring the interaction between voters, the content they consume, and how that content influences their beliefs. Moreover, this study analyzes the influence of misinformation and disinformation on voter perception, focusing on how voters perceive and react to it, and its overall impact on political decision-making. According to Munzir et al. (2025) following political social media influencers may shape key democratic outcomes by influencing individuals' political efficacy and levels of political participation. Beyond fostering political interest, eudaimonic motivation, the desire to engage with media for insight, reflection, and personal growth, may affect how young adults process and respond to political content shared by influencers.

This gap underscores the distinctiveness of the present study. Unlike prior investigations that focused broadly on national trends, political campaigns, or platform-level analysis, this research centers on the micro-level experiences of UBIAN voters and explores how their media consumption patterns shape political beliefs, exposure to partisan content, and tendencies toward polarization. It uniquely integrates theoretical frameworks with the lived realities of university students, generating insights that can be directly applied in academic settings. In doing so, the study bridges scholarly inquiry with pedagogical practice, offering both diagnostic and actionable outcomes. The researcher is compelled to investigate this issue due to its significant implications for democratic participation, youth political agency, and the integrity of future elections, as students increasingly rely on digital platforms for political information without sufficient critical evaluation skills. By examining how UBIAN voters interpret and respond to online political content amid rising emotional politics and disinformation in the Philippines, the study aims to promote a more informed, discerning, and participative student electorate.

In a similar vein, this study is grounded in legal and institutional mandates that emphasize media literacy, responsible digital citizenship, and fact-based political engagement as reflected in the Philippine Constitution (Article II, Section 13), Republic Act 10912, and CHED policies promoting critical thinking and civic participation. Recent initiatives such as DepEd's CyberSafe Program, the Presidential Communications Office's digital literacy and fact-checking efforts, and COMELEC's guidelines on responsible digital campaigning further underscore the state's response to online misinformation and electoral integrity threats. Anchored in these frameworks, the study affirms that advancing digital literacy in higher education is both an academic responsibility and a civic duty aligned with national priorities.

Ultimately, this action research aspires to produce evidence-based insights that can guide both educational practice and institutional policy. By mapping the patterns through which UBIAN voters consume, evaluate, and act upon political information online, the study aims to generate a set of concrete outputs based on the findings of the study. These final outputs, rooted in the study's data-driven findings, will serve as practical tools for strengthening critical digital literacy, encouraging informed political participation, and equipping young voters with the competencies needed to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape. Through these outcomes, the research seeks to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to the cultivation of a more resilient and democratically engaged UBIAN community.

Framework of the Study

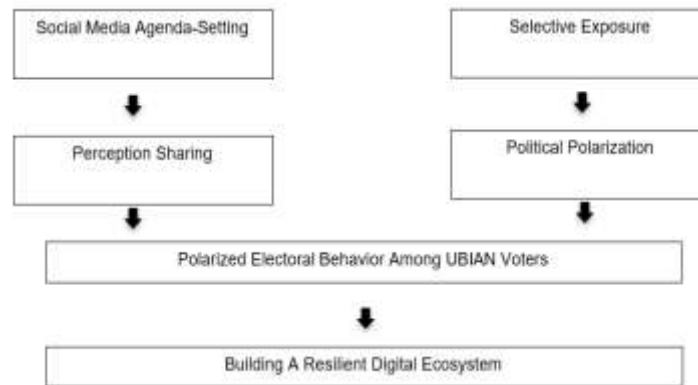


Figure 1. Research Paradigm

The diagram illustrates the process by which social media influences student electoral behavior. Social media agenda-setting shapes perception sharing, while selective exposure contributes to political polarization among UBIAN voters. These dynamics collectively result in polarized electoral behavior within the student population. The framework emphasizes the need to develop a resilient digital ecosystem to mitigate polarization and promote informed political engagement. Ong and Cabañes (2019) reported that interviews with advertising and campaign operatives show a rapidly expanding market for disinformation work. As disinformation tactics become normalized, a commercial sector has emerged made up of informal outfits that hire young digital workers in fragile, precarious jobs — so disinformation is not only a threat to electoral integrity but a political-economic problem as well. Relative to this, the results of the study can provide media practitioners and journalists with insights into ethical reporting, the dangers of media bias, and the importance of balanced news coverage in reducing political polarization. Also, companies that manage digital media spaces can use the research to improve algorithms, reduce echo chambers, and implement fact-checking measures to prevent misinformation. The findings can help lawmakers create policies that promote responsible journalism, regulate misinformation, and ensure fair media representation in political discourse. Best of all, academic institutions can use the research to integrate media literacy programs into curricula, helping students recognize biased reporting regarding political information.

This study is anchored in Agenda-Setting Theory and Selective Exposure Theory to frame its conceptual foundation. Agenda-Setting Theory, as articulated by McCombs and Shaw and expanded by Lee (2021), explains how media salience in interaction with motivated reasoning shapes the political issues individuals prioritize. Although the media does not determine what people think, it effectively influences what they think about by emphasizing particular topics. In the Philippine electoral context, especially during the 2022 elections, social media trends, viral content, and influencer endorsements significantly directed political discourse and heightened voter polarization. Selective Exposure Theory by Sears and Freedman complements this view by explaining individuals' preference for information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Empirical evidence from Cinelli et al. (2019) demonstrates that limited source-following behavior on social media fosters echo chambers and ideological segregation. Together, these theories elucidate how algorithmically curated digital environments shape the political awareness, attitudes, and polarization of technologically adept UBIAN voters.

Though this issue is international in scale, its effects are distinctly felt at the local level—particularly among young and highly connected voters in university settings. UBIAN students occupy a critical

demographic: tech-savvy, digitally immersed, and continuously exposed to online political content. Despite their frequent engagement with social media, many lack structured training in digital literacy, fact-checking, and critical consumption of political materials. Consequently, they may unknowingly fall into echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing biases, limit exposure to diverse perspectives, and intensify political polarization. These theories illuminate these dynamics, explaining how social media not only dictates what issues young voters pay attention to but also shapes how they interpret those issues through algorithmically reinforced information bubbles. However, while previous research has examined Filipino voters in general, little is known about how these mechanisms specifically influence the political thinking of University of Batangas student voters, making this a crucial and underexplored area of inquiry.

Beknazar-Yuzbashev and Stalinski (2022) studied that advertisement is not just a key component of Facebook revenue, it is Facebook revenue, making up 98% in 2020. A part of that revenue comes from political ads, with almost 11 million purchased since May 2018, at a cost of \$2.2 billion. In 2020, not spending \$200,000 on political campaign ads on Facebook was lambasted as criminal by some members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Politicians are not alone in this conviction even Russian trolls buy political ads with multiple Congressional hearings ensuing. This is supported by another study on how disinformation became systemic in the Philippines by McPherson (2025). Studies by communications scholars have shown that disinformation in the Philippines is not just political—it is professionalized. Former advertising and PR professionals have transitioned into running coordinated disinformation campaigns, often funded by political actors. These operations have even been exported to other countries like Cambodia and Guam. A 2017 Oxford University study estimated that Duterte’s campaign spent around \$200,000 to hire online trolls, with some earning \$1,000–\$2,000 per month to manage multiple fake accounts. The disinformation infrastructure built during Duterte’s rise continues to influence Philippine politics. The tactics pioneered in the Philippines have since been adopted globally, influencing elections and public discourse in various countries.

Objectives of the Study

In pursuit of a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which digital communication landscapes influence contemporary electoral behavior, this study articulates targeted objectives that guide its analytical trajectory. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. identify the role of social media influencers in forming the voters’ electoral behavior.
2. analyze how misinformation and disinformation on social media play in shaping voter perception;
3. determine how paid advertisements and sponsored content on campaign elections contribute to political polarization and
4. create multiple outputs to advocate digital literacy and media transparency among UBIAN voters.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using survey methods to examine the influence of social media on students' electoral behavior. The study involved 650 registered student voters enrolled in various academic programs from different departments at the University of Batangas, Main Campus I. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select participants from the total population of registered student voters. This approach ensured that each eligible student had an equal probability of being included in the study. The use of simple random sampling helped reduce selection bias and strengthen the representativeness of the findings. Data collection was conducted through a single quantitative phase involving the administration of structured survey questionnaires.

The instruments were designed to generate measurable data on students' social media usage, political awareness, levels of electoral participation, and perceived influence of online content on political opinions and voting decisions. Data for this study were collected exclusively through a structured survey administered to 650 students from all academic colleges at the campus, ensuring representation across diverse disciplines.

The survey served as the primary data source capturing quantitative information on respondents' social media usage patterns, political awareness, participation in electoral activities, and the perceived influence of online content on their political opinions and voting decisions. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic publications, and previous studies on social media's role in political behavior and youth electoral engagement, providing theoretical and empirical context for interpreting the findings. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency counts, percentages, weighted means, and ranking, to summarize and interpret respondents' patterns and perceptions. All research procedures complied with ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Results and Discussion

This section presents quantitative findings providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

1. Role of social media influencers in forming the voters' electoral behavior

The data imply that social media influencers play a substantial role in shaping voters' electoral behavior, with respondents consistently affirming their influence across multiple dimensions of perception, engagement, and political decision-making. High weighted means on understanding political issues, increased engagement with political content, and endorsement-driven support underscore the growing power of influencer-mediated political communication. Notably, the highest weighted mean is Item 10 (3.58), indicating strong agreement that influencers should use their platforms to discuss political matters, reflecting respondents' recognition of influencers as important actors in political discourse. In contrast, the lowest weighted mean is Item 5 (2.89), suggesting that although respondents generally agree, they remain cautious about trusting influencers' political opinions; thus, while influencers can spark interest and participation, their credibility as political opinion sources is limited. Overall, the composite mean of 3.24 indicates that influencers function as significant opinion brokers whose platforms shape the behaviors of emerging voters.

Table 1
Role of Social Media Influencers

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Social media influencers significantly impact my views on political candidates.	3.21	Agree
2. Social media influencers help shape my final decision during elections.	3.05	Agree
3. Social media influencers affect how I perceive the credibility of political candidates.	3.18	Agree
4. The content posted by influencers helps me understand political issues better.	3.42	Agree
5. I trust the political opinions shared by social media influencers I follow.	2.89	Agree
6. I am more likely to support a candidate endorsed by a social media influencer.	3.12	Agree
7. I am more likely to participate in political discussions online after seeing influencers talk about politics.	3.38	Agree
8. I consider influencers to be credible sources of political information.	3.10	Agree
9. I have engaged more with political content because of influencers' posts.	3.46	Agree
10. I believe influencers should use their platforms to discuss political matters.	3.58	Strongly Agree
Composite Mean	3.24	Agree

Shmalenko et al. (2021) found social networks enable influencers to shape political discourse, public opinion, and citizen behavior. It highlights how virtual spaces enable engagement with social issues and reduce the dominance of traditional media contributes to hybrid media systems. As social media audiences expand, influencers gain greater power to reinforce and sustain political discourse, influencing citizen behavior, public debates, and political decision-making.

2. Misinformation and disinformation on social media play in shaping voter perception

Table 2
Role of Misinformation and Disinformation

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Misinformation on social media has influenced how I perceive certain political candidates.	3.42	Agree
2. Misinformation on social media has influenced my voting decision in past elections.	3.18	Agree
3. Disinformation on social media contributes to my doubts about the electoral process.	3.56	Strongly Agree
4. Social media has made it harder for me to distinguish between true and false political information.	3.49	Agree
5. False information on social media has affected my opinion on political issues.	3.37	Agree
6. Exposure to misleading political content decreases my trust in political institutions.	3.61	Strongly Agree
7. I often encounter misleading political content on social media.	3.72	Strongly Agree
8. I have unknowingly shared political content on social media that was later proven false.	2.91	Agree
9. I rely on fact-checking sources to verify political information I see online.	3.28	Agree
10. I believe that disinformation campaigns are intentionally used to manipulate voters.	3.84	Strongly Agree
Composite Mean	3.44	Agree

The findings demonstrate that misinformation and disinformation on social media exert a profound influence on voters' perceptions as reflected in consistently high weighted means across indicators related to trust, clarity, and decision-making. The highest weighted mean is Item 10 (3.84), which shows strong agreement that disinformation campaigns are intentionally used to manipulate voters. This indicates that respondents are highly aware of organized efforts to influence political behavior through false information. Closely following this are Items 7 (3.72) and 6 (3.61), suggesting that frequent exposure to misleading content and declining trust in political institutions are major concerns among voters. In contrast, the lowest weighted mean is Item 8 (2.91), where respondents agree, but to a lesser extent, that they have unknowingly shared false political content. This suggests that although misinformation is widespread, voters may not always recognize or acknowledge their own role in unknowingly spreading it. With a composite mean of

3.44, the results underscore that distorted political content has become a critical force shaping voter skepticism, uncertainty, and vulnerability within the contemporary electoral environment.

Disinformation and misinformation continued to circulate on major platforms, with Facebook and others still profiting from political ads despite bans on overt political advertising. Even platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube failed to stop coordinated election-related disinformation posted by non-candidates. Political figures also employ firms that craft campaign messages, spread them strategically, and hire influencers or anonymous bloggers. While social media was not the sole factor, Marcos Jr.’s victory was heavily enabled by its weaponization, which platforms could have mitigated through greater transparency and long-term, context-specific safeguards (Digital Reach, 2023).

3. Paid advertisements and sponsored content on campaign elections contribute to political polarization

Table 3
Impact of Sponsored Content on Political Polarization

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation
1. Sponsored political content usually promotes a one-sided view of political issues.	3.52	Strongly Agree
2. Sponsored political content has influenced my perception of people who support other candidates.	3.18	Agree
3. Political ads on social media reinforce my existing political beliefs.	3.39	Agree
4. Exposure to paid political content makes me more critical of opposing political views.	3.27	Agree
5. Paid campaign content contributes to the growing divide between opposing political groups.	3.56	Strongly Agree
6. Paid political advertisements often portray opposing candidates negatively.	3.61	Strongly Agree
7. The frequency of political ads I see increases my bias toward one side of the political spectrum.	3.33	Agree
8. I believe political ads are designed to emotionally sway voters rather than inform them.	3.68	Strongly Agree
9. I have noticed that political ads contribute to arguments or divisions among users online.	3.49	Agree
10. I often see paid political advertisements on my social media feeds during election periods.	3.72	Strongly Agree
Composite Mean	3.48	Agree

The results indicate that paid advertisements and sponsored political content substantially contribute to political polarization, with respondents strongly agreeing that such materials frequently present one-sided narratives and emotionally charged messaging. The highest weighted mean is Item 10 (3.72), indicating strong agreement that respondents often see paid political advertisements on their social media feeds during election periods. This highlights the pervasive visibility of political ads, which increases the likelihood of repeated exposure and their polarizing effects. Another high mean is Item 8 (3.68), showing that respondents strongly believe political ads are designed to emotionally sway voters rather than inform them, emphasizing the manipulative nature of paid campaign materials. In contrast, the lowest weighted mean is Item 2 (3.18), which indicates that while respondents agree that sponsored content influences their perception of supporters of opposing candidates, this effect is comparatively weaker than other dimensions of polarization. This suggests that although polarization is reinforced by paid content, personal judgments about other groups are less affected than emotional or ideological reactions. High weighted means across indicators reveal that repeated exposure to paid content reinforces existing beliefs, intensifies criticism of opposing views, and amplifies negative portrayals of rival candidates. With a composite mean of 3.48, the data underscore that paid political messaging is a powerful catalyst of division, shaping online interactions and deepening ideological divides during elections.

Internews Philippines (2023) found that disinformation has become a linchpin of Philippine politics. It has ceased to be another political tactic for leverage and has become a necessary political scheme to take and hold power. It is the rise of the disinformation industry, however, that propelled the covert manipulation of public opinion as a dominant political strategy. Research has documented that disinformation and manipulation have become more rampant from the 2016 Philippine General Elections to the 2019 Philippine Midterm Elections, if not normalized in the 2022 Philippine Elections. Throughout the years, deceptive strategies have also evolved from the classic fake news playbook to more subtle manipulation techniques.

Research Outputs

Von Sikorski (2025) cited that although the spread of misinformation is as old as human history, social media has changed the game by enabling people to generate misinformation easily and spread it rapidly in an anonymous and decentralized fashion. The impact of misinformation can be destructive to various aspects of people's lives, from public health and politics to climate change and economic issues. Many studies have reviewed the methods of detecting misinformation, but less attention has been paid to synthesizing misinformation-countering strategies, such as what to do with the posts containing misinformation that escape the detection of fact-checking systems and how to effectively articulate content that corrects disinformation on social media to reduce its impact. Corollary to this, the researcher is compelled to produce outputs on how to become more discerning digital citizens contributing to a more resilient digital ecosystem. These multiple outputs, such as documentary video, slide/PowerPoint presentation, and infographics, are aimed at maximizing the impact, accessibility, and usefulness of the findings of the study.

This emphasizes the importance of advocating for digital literacy, especially during Philippine elections, to help students critically assess online information. Corollary to this, the researcher is compelled to produce outputs on how to become more discerning digital citizens contributing to a more resilient digital ecosystem. These multiple outputs, such as documentary video, PowerPoint presentation and infographics, aimed to maximize the impact and accessibility of the study's findings. This emphasizes the importance of advocating for digital literacy during Philippine elections to help students critically assess online information. The documentary video is an effective output for academic research because it engages a wider audience. On the other hand, the PowerPoint presentation is an educational material that breaks down key concepts from the study in a clear and digestible format suitable for classroom use, community seminars, and online workshops. Infographics communicate ideas to both expert and non-expert audiences, which bridges the gap between researchers and the general public.

These outputs may also be used by different sectors to promote responsible and smart voting. The government can use them in public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about misinformation. Non-government organizations can integrate them into community programs that teach people how to verify online content. Institutions such as civic groups or research centers can use them to guide training sessions on critical thinking and media literacy. Universities can incorporate these materials into classes, webinars, and student activities to help young voters become more informed and discerning. Together, these groups can use the outputs to strengthen digital literacy and support a more responsible voting population.

The following are the links to access the outputs:

1. Documentary video on social media's influence in shaping voters' perception
<https://bit.ly/3JDp0gt>

2. Slide/PowerPoint presentation on mitigation strategies for a more informed electorate
<https://bit.ly/49wQ6Ac>
3. Infographics on how to fight misinformation and disinformation during elections
<https://bit.ly/3X8AOu5>

Conclusions

Based on the study conducted, the following conclusions were formulated:

1. The study revealed that social media influencers moderately shape voters' perceptions of candidates but have a limited impact on actual voting choices. Respondents view influencers as tools for awareness and engagement rather than decisive figures in political decision-making.
2. Findings showed that misinformation and disinformation cause confusion and distrust among voters toward the electoral process. However, voters' reliance on fact-checking sources reflects growing critical awareness and resistance to false information.
3. Results indicated that paid political content promotes biased narratives and emotional manipulation, deepening online polarization. Still, respondents' moderate agreement suggests efforts to stay objective despite exposure to divisive materials.
4. Overall, the findings emphasize the need for advocacy and educational campaigns to boost digital literacy and responsible media use. Strengthening fact-checking, critical evaluation, and transparency will empower UBIAN voters to be informed and participative citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following are recommended:

1. The university community may develop and implement advocacy materials, infographics, forums, and online campaigns that promote digital literacy and responsible social media use. These initiatives can create a campus-wide culture of critical thinking on the role of social media influencers and safe online engagement.
2. Educational institutions and civic organizations may engage social media influencers as partners in voter education initiatives through internet-based and digital platforms. This collaboration can help young student voters access accurate, engaging, and youth-friendly content that counter-attack misinformation and disinformation.
3. Universities may intensify subject topics and related programs on media and information literacy, ensuring that students are trained to detect sponsored content and navigate digital spaces responsibly.
4. Policymakers and election regulators may utilize the study's outputs to strengthen transparency and accountability policies for online political advertising. They may require clear labeling and stricter monitoring of digital campaign activities to critically evaluate online political information and protect voters from manipulation.

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