

## Digital Public Sphere and Political Participation: Muhammadiyah Cadres in Surakarta

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformation of democracy in the digital public sphere through the political participation of Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta. Using a qualitative method, data were collected from 22 participants through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and document analysis from January to March 2025. The study identified three dimensions of political participation: discursive (data-based content production), mobilizational (digital movement coordination), and educational (digital literacy initiatives). The findings reveal that digital platforms enable inclusive and dynamic political discourse, reshaping democratic engagement with progressive Islamic values. This study contributes to the theory of digital democracy and offers practical implications for religious organizations to strengthen civic engagement and counter misinformation in the digital age.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed public spaces, shifting them from physical to digital realms (Eren et al., 2024). This digital transformation has significantly impacted modern democratic processes, enabling real-time interaction and mobilization through social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook (Anju, 2024). In Indonesia, one of the largest internet users globally, this shift has redefined political participation, offering easier access to information and facilitating the rapid dissemination of political discourse (APJII, 2024). Within this context, socio-religious organizations like Muhammadiyah play a pivotal role in shaping social and political narratives, particularly through the active engagement of their cadres in digital public spaces (Jufri, 2022).

Muhammadiyah, as one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, has historically contributed to national political dynamics, despite its formal stance of political neutrality (Nashir et al., 2019). The organization's cadres often engage in political discourse, reflecting the belief that Islam encompasses both state and religious affairs (Rustam et al., 2024). In the digital era, Muhammadiyah cadres leverage social media to disseminate religious teachings, advocate for social issues, and participate in political movements, thereby enhancing their political efficacy and engagement (Ahmad et al., 2019). Surakarta, a city with a rich historical and political landscape, serves as an ideal case study to explore how Muhammadiyah cadres navigate digital public spaces for political participation (Raqib et al., 2022).

This study aims to explore the transformation of democracy through the digital political participation of Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta, employing a conceptual framework that elucidates the dynamics of such participation. The research seeks to develop a theoretical model on the role of religious-based organizations in shaping digital democracy. By focusing on Muhammadiyah cadres, this study addresses a gap in the literature, as few studies have examined digital political participation within religious-based civil society organizations like Muhammadiyah. The findings are expected to enrich the discourse on digital democracy and offer practical insights for organizations navigating the complexities of digital political engagement.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention to digital democracy and online political engagement, limited studies have specifically focused on how religious-based civil society organizations, such as Muhammadiyah, navigate and transform political participation in digital public spheres. Most existing literature examines either digital activism broadly or the role of youth in digital political movements, without dissecting the unique socio-religious dynamics at play within Islamic organizations. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the case of Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta – an underrepresented group in digital political participation studies – thus contributing novel insights to the field of digital democracy and religious political activism.

The research questions guiding this study are: How do Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta perceive digital public spaces in the context of political participation? What forms of digital political participation do they engage in?

And what implications do their digital political experiences have for their understanding of digital democracy?

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### ***Digital Public Space Theory***

The concept of the public sphere originated with Jürgen Habermas (1991), who defined it as an arena where citizens have rational discussions about public issues (Almuqren, 2023). In the digital context, the public sphere is evolving to be more inclusive and dynamic (De Blasio et al., 2020), but also faces challenges such as exclusive algorithms and polarisation of opinions (O'Mahony, 2021).

Manuel Castells (1996) reinforces this view with the concept of network society, where the digital public sphere becomes an important terrain for public opinion formation and political mobilisation (Mahmood et al., 2022). In this research, digital public space is understood as a place where Muhammadiyah cadres interact, discuss, and voice political ideas based on progressive Islamic values.

### ***Political Participation Theory***

Political participation is defined as the involvement of individuals or groups in the political process to influence policies or leaders (Addink, 2022). Sidney Verba and Norman Nie (1972) classify political participation into conventional (elections, petitions) and non-conventional (demonstrations, online activism). In the digital era, forms of participation are evolving towards a more flexible and decentralised direction, including political content production and digital education (Buchynska, 2022). In this study, Muhammadiyah cadres showed discursive, mobilising, and educative forms of digital participation that adapted to the local context and the development of communication technology.

### ***Digital Democracy Theory***

Digital democracy emphasises the role of information and communication technology in increasing citizens' political participation. Social media acts as a connective medium that enables real-time participation, public deliberation, and checks on power (Congge et al., 2023; Nehwal, 2022). However, challenges such as polarisation and disinformation remain a serious concern (Xu et al., 2024).

In the context of this research, digital democracy is represented by the activities of Muhammadiyah cadres in disseminating value-based political information, strengthening digital literacy, and utilising digital media as a means of political education.

### ***New Social Movement Theory***

New social movement theory (NSM) emphasises the shift from class-based movements towards issues of identity, values, and cultural expression (Ankara et al., 2021). New social movements also adopt more fluid and decentralised forms of communication, including digital connectivity through connective action (Mirbabaie et al., 2021).

This research sees the digital participation of Muhammadiyah cadres as a form of new social movement that integrates Islamic values, education, and political engagement in the digital space. This research combines four main theories: digital public space, political participation, digital democracy, and new social movements. These four theories form the foundation to explain the dynamics of digital democracy transformation by Muhammadiyah Surakarta cadres.

Synthesizing the aforementioned theories, this study posits that digital political participation among Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta is shaped by the interplay between discursive engagement, digital mobilization, and educational initiatives, all grounded in the organization's Islamic progressive values. These three dimensions are hypothesized to contribute significantly to the transformation from procedural to substantive democracy.

Based on the synthesis, the research proposes the following hypothesis: "The synergy between discursive, mobilizational, and educational forms of digital participation among Muhammadiyah cadres significantly contributes to their transformation towards substantive digital democracy."

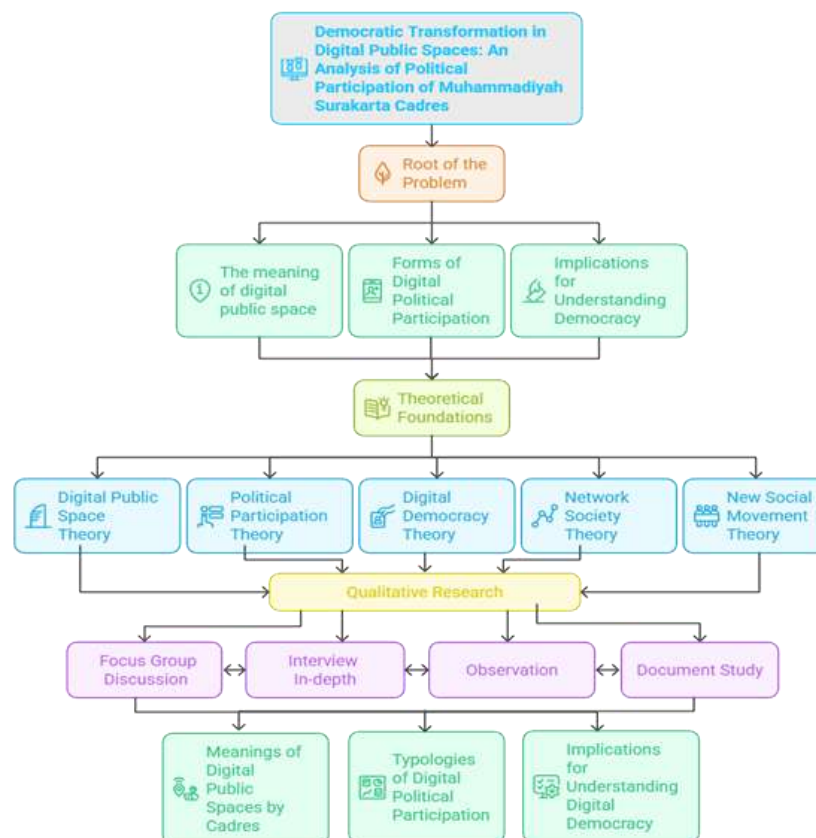


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore the dynamics of digital political participation among Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta. The choice of this approach is based on the

objective of uncovering the meaning and lived experiences of individuals in their interaction with digital public spaces and how it shapes their political involvement (Karim et al., 2024). This methodological framework aligns with John W. Creswell's (2013) emphasis on exploring individuals' experiences and the meanings they assign to social phenomena.

Data were collected through multiple methods including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and document analysis. The triangulation of these techniques was intended to enhance the validity and richness of the data. Respondents were selected purposively based on their active engagement in Muhammadiyah and visible participation in digital political discourses, such as through social media platforms, online forums, and organizational campaigns.

The research population includes cadres of Muhammadiyah in the city of Surakarta, with the unit of analysis being individual cadres who demonstrate significant interaction within digital public spaces. Data analysis was conducted using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) technique, emphasizing meaning-making processes and contextual interpretation of the subjects' digital activities. The researcher also employed thematic analysis to categorize patterns of digital political participation and their impact on democratic understanding. Data validation was ensured through source triangulation and member-checking, while ethical considerations were addressed by securing informed consent and maintaining confidentiality. Overall, this methodology was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of how Muhammadiyah cadres negotiate their political identities and roles within the evolving digital landscape.

## RESULTS

This study was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, focusing on Muhammadiyah cadres actively engaging in digital political participation. The participants were 22 cadres from various generations and organizational levels, involved through focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, document analysis, and digital observations.

Based on thematic analysis, three main categories of digital political participation were identified:

1. Discursive Participation

Cadres actively participated in online public discourse through content creation (e.g., political analysis, opinion pieces), data-driven discussions, and multi-platform engagement (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok). These activities reflect a high degree of deliberative digital engagement aligned with Theocharis & van Deth's (2018) model of creative political participation.

2. Mobilizing Participation

The cadres organized and mobilized digital actions, including online petitions, coordinated messaging campaigns during elections, and fact-checking movements. Their initiatives were aimed at community awareness and political advocacy, demonstrating alignment with Gibson & Cantijoch's (2013) integrated political participation framework.

### 3. Educational Participation

The study found that Muhammadiyah cadres initiated and participated in digital literacy webinars, community-based political education, and public deliberation forums—especially through programs like Akademi Digital Lansia and public podcasts such as “Posisi Politik Muhammadiyah Pasca Pemilu”.



**Figure 2. Digital Political Participation of Muhammadiyah Cadres**

Participation in digital public spaces reshaped cadres' conceptualization of democracy. Their experience shifted their view from procedural democracy – focused on voting and formal structures – to *substantive democracy*, emphasizing continuous public deliberation and citizen engagement.

Digital political participation of Muhammadiyah Surakarta Cadres is shaped through the interaction of three core dimensions. The first component, Discursive Digital Engagement, refers to the active involvement of Muhammadiyah cadres in producing and sharing political content, engaging in online debates, and contributing to the formation of public opinion on digital platforms.

The second component, Political Empowerment via Mobilization, captures the way cadres utilize digital tools to organize and coordinate collective actions, such as online petitions, election campaigns, and advocacy efforts for social or political causes.

The third element, Educational Initiatives in Digital Democracy, involves structured efforts to increase digital political literacy, such as webinars, discussion forums, or media training designed to enhance citizens' critical engagement with democratic processes.

Taken together, these three variables contribute to the overall outcome, which is the transformation of political participation in the digital age. This equation highlights that meaningful digital participation does not rely on a single factor, but rather emerges from the synergy between discourse, mobilization, and education within a digital public sphere.

Muhammadiyah Surakarta has strategically adapted to the dynamics of the digital public sphere by implementing a series of integrated digital strategies.

First, the organization employed multi-platform content differentiation, utilizing specific platforms for tailored objectives—for instance, Instagram and TikTok for youth outreach, Facebook for community engagement, and YouTube for educational content dissemination.

Second, it applied segment-based audience targeting, particularly focusing on the younger generation. This was done by aligning content style, language, and format to resonate with digital-native audiences, thereby increasing political awareness and engagement among Muhammadiyah youth.

Third, Muhammadiyah initiated structured programs for enhancing digital literacy, including special sessions for elderly members and civic education initiatives for youth. These programs aimed to reduce the digital divide and empower all segments of the organization to engage critically with political content online.

Through these strategies, Muhammadiyah Surakarta has strengthened its role in the digital democratic ecosystem, positioning itself as:

- (1) a facilitator of political discourse,
- (2) a watchdog promoting democratic ethics, and
- (3) a medium for expressing political aspirations within the framework of Islamic progressive values.

Table 1. Muhammadiyah's Political Participation

| Strategy Type            | Platform(s) Used           | Notable Output                          |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Content Production       | Instagram, YouTube, TikTok | Podcast series, live discussions, memes |
| Public Deliberation      | Zoom, Facebook Live        | Thematic webinars, community forums     |
| Mobilization & Campaigns | WhatsApp, Facebook         | Electoral education, petition sharing   |

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital transformation has significantly reshaped the modes and meanings of political participation among Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta. In the context of an increasingly digitized public sphere, the participation of these cadres reflects a shift from conventional political engagement—centered on voting and formal affiliations—toward more dynamic, expressive, and networked forms of interaction.

Firstly, the emergence of discursive digital participation, wherein Muhammadiyah members engage in the production and dissemination of political content, illustrates the realization of a deliberative democratic practice in the digital realm. This aligns with Habermas' (1991) conceptualization of the public sphere as a discursive space where citizens exchange rational arguments. However, unlike the classical Habermasian model, the digital public sphere is fragmented, platform-based, and algorithm-driven (Fuchs, 2021). Despite these

challenges, Muhammadiyah cadres are actively reclaiming digital spaces to foster informed political dialogue, thus supporting claims made by Theocharis and van Deth (2017) regarding the rise of “creative political participation.”

Secondly, mobilizational participation indicates that digital media function not merely as channels of expression but also as instruments of collective action. Cadres coordinated online efforts during election cycles and social campaigns, demonstrating their ability to navigate connective action frameworks (Mirbabaie et al., 2021). This activism is often framed within Islamic values, thereby reinforcing the organization’s ideological orientation while simultaneously adapting to the norms of digital politics.

Thirdly, educational initiatives carried out by the organization—such as digital literacy for elders and civic training for youth—represent a strategic effort to cultivate digital citizenship (Lievrouw & Loader, 2020). These initiatives ensure that the participation of Muhammadiyah members is not only widespread but also informed and ethically grounded. It reflects a proactive institutional adaptation to the risks of digital mis/disinformation, polarization, and ideological fragmentation (Papakyriakopoulos & M. Mboya, 2022).

The transformation of democracy among Muhammadiyah cadres also demonstrates a shift in their political understanding—from procedural democracy toward substantive democracy. Cadres no longer view democracy merely as electoral participation, but as a continuous process of public reasoning, accountability, and value-based engagement. This transformation supports the growing discourse on Islamic civil society’s role in democratization in Indonesia (Qodir et al., 2023).

Moreover, Muhammadiyah's digital strategy illustrates an example of organizational adaptability in the age of media convergence. Through platform-specific content, segmented audience targeting, and values-based messaging, Muhammadiyah Surakarta serves as a model for how religious-based civil society organizations can remain relevant and impactful in digital politics (Ali & Maksum, 2024).

This study contributes to the understanding that the digital public sphere is not ideologically neutral, but can be reoriented toward ethical political engagement through value-driven institutions such as Muhammadiyah. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledges that such engagement is not without its tensions—especially concerning the boundaries between religious identity, political neutrality, and digital activism (Burhani, 2023).

In conclusion, the discussion reveals that Muhammadiyah cadres are not passive consumers of political information but are becoming critical agents in digital democratic transformation, blending faith-based motivations with contemporary civic practices.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that digital transformation has significantly altered the nature and dynamics of political participation among Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta. Their involvement in digital platforms reflects a multidimensional form of political engagement that extends beyond voting and



traditional activism. The research identified three key forms of digital political participation: discursive, mobilizational, and educational.

Discursive participation was characterized by active content creation and public deliberation on political issues via platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Mobilizational participation manifested in coordinated online activism during electoral cycles and issue-based campaigns. Educational participation was represented through structured efforts to promote digital literacy and civic understanding, especially among older members and youth.

These findings indicate a paradigmatic shift in the cadres' understanding of democracy—from procedural to substantive—emphasizing ethical engagement, continuous deliberation, and inclusivity. Moreover, Muhammadiyah Surakarta's adaptive strategy demonstrates how civil society organizations can remain politically relevant in a rapidly evolving digital public sphere (Fuchs, 2021; Qodir et al., 2023).

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following practical and theoretical implementations:

1. **For Civil Society Organizations:** Religious-based organizations like Muhammadiyah should further institutionalize digital civic education programs to strengthen members' political literacy and resilience against misinformation.
2. **For Political Communication Practitioners:** Multi-platform strategies should be developed and tailored for specific audience segments, combining religious values with civic messaging to ensure inclusive political discourse (Ali & Maksum, 2024).
3. **For Policymakers:** Local governments should collaborate with grassroots organizations in building digital public forums to facilitate participatory democracy and support value-based political engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).
4. **For Future Research:** Further studies are encouraged to compare digital political engagement across different Islamic civil society groups in various Indonesian regions, to understand localized patterns of digital democratization.

This research contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to understand the intersection of religion, technology, and political participation in the context of Indonesia's digital democracy. It affirms the potential of digital platforms as tools for inclusive and ethical political transformation when strategically managed by values-based institutions.

## FURTHER STUDY

As with any qualitative research, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the findings are context-specific, focusing solely on Muhammadiyah cadres in Surakarta. As such, the conclusions may not be directly generalizable to other regions or Islamic civil society organizations in Indonesia without contextual adaptation.

Second, the study primarily employed focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, which, while rich in depth, may be limited in scope. The exclusion of

a broader survey-based quantitative approach may have constrained the ability to measure the prevalence and patterns of digital political behavior at a larger scale.

Third, the study was conducted during a period of post-election political reflection, which may have influenced the political tone and intensity of digital participation among respondents. Temporal and political contexts could have shaped the narratives captured during fieldwork.

Future studies are encouraged to adopt a comparative approach by examining how digital political participation varies across different Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or youth-led civic movements. In addition, integrating mixed-methods approaches would offer a more comprehensive understanding of political transformation in the digital age, combining statistical generalization with in-depth exploration.

Lastly, further research could investigate the impact of algorithmic governance and platform moderation policies on the political behavior of religious-based organizations in digital spaces, particularly concerning issues of censorship, misinformation, and ideological polarization.

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