

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Choosing the Right Leader: A Qualitative Study of Gen Z Voters' Standards for Political Leadership in North Cotabato

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This qualitative study examined the leadership standards Generation Z voters in four municipalities of North Cotabato, Philippines (Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan) use to evaluate political candidates, and how personal values, social influences, and digital exposure shape these standards. The study engages with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by examining how youth voters' evaluative standards can inform more accountable and participatory democratic institutions.

Method: Using a thematic analysis design (Braun & Clarke, 2023), the researchers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten (10) purposively sampled Gen Z college students, generating in-depth insight into their lived experiences and perspectives on political engagement.

Findings: Thematic analysis identified four leadership qualities participants prioritized when evaluating political candidates: Consistency in Public Service, Empathy for People, Sense of Accountability, and Competence. Consistency reflects the importance of reliability and alignment between words and actions, while empathy emphasizes moral leadership and care for societal welfare; accountability highlights transparency and ethical responsibility, and competence underscores practical governance ability. The findings also indicate that social media plays a central role in participants' political awareness and discourse, though participants reported actively evaluating and verifying information to navigate misinformation.

Contribution: Interpreted through Lifestyle Politics Theory and Political Socialization Theory, the findings suggest that personal values and social influences jointly shape these young voters' evaluative standards. The study offers context-specific insight for policymakers, educators, and electoral bodies seeking to engage youth voters and strengthen voter education in North Cotabato, while contributing a locally grounded case to the broader literature on youth political behavior in the Philippines.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, generally defined as those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s (Dimock, 2019), is emerging as a significant force in addressing contemporary global challenges, including economic instability, rising education costs, and environmental crises. Known for their digital fluency and strong social awareness, many members of this generation actively engage in social and political issues. A survey of 1,000 Americans found that nearly one-third of Gen Z participates in social justice initiatives, indicating higher levels of civic engagement than previous generations (United Way NCA, 2024). However, unlike market decisions, in which individuals directly obtain what they choose, voting outcomes do not always reflect individual preferences, as election results depend on collective choices (Holcombe, 2021). Despite this limitation, Gen Z continues to express political preferences and participate in civic activities, reflecting their commitment to social change.

Following the 2025 Philippine Senate elections, understanding the factors that influence voter preferences among the growing Generation Z demographic remains critical for future election cycles in the Philippines. Studies show that younger voters in the Philippines tend to prefer candidates who demonstrate integrity, wisdom, and strong moral character (Timoteo, 2021). However, voting behavior in the Philippines remains complex. Party identification and pre-election surveys often influence voter choices more strongly than policy issues or candidate orientation (Batara et al., 2021). In addition, voters' preferences for desirable personal attributes do not always align with the characteristics of elected officials, reflecting the influence of party recruitment strategies and the electoral system (Calvo & Murillo, 2019). This complexity is consistent with earlier work describing the fluid and often undecided pre-election mindset of young Filipino voters (Collado et al., 2020).

Research on Generation Z's political engagement has largely focused on global trends, particularly the role of

social media and digital platforms in shaping political awareness and participation — whether examined through survey-based approaches to youth political socialization in Indonesia (Putra et al., 2024) or explorations of young intellectual figures in Indonesian political life (Vira et al., 2024). In the Philippine context, studies have also highlighted the growing involvement of young voters, often emphasizing digital activism and online political engagement. However, existing literature primarily focuses on urban or highly connected areas, leaving rural and region-specific contexts less explored. In provinces such as North Cotabato, where socio-cultural diversity and local political dynamics may shape youth engagement differently, empirical research on the specific standards Gen Z voters use to evaluate political candidates remains limited.

Two recent North Cotabato-based studies complicate a claim of a wholly unstudied context and should be explicitly situated relative to the present study. Osumo et al. (2025) examined Generation Z's use of social media and political participation specifically in Makilala, Cotabato — one of the four municipalities included in the present study — using a mixed-methods design, while Osumo and Letigio (2025) examined the strategic leadership and mentoring experiences of young leaders across North Cotabato more broadly. Both studies confirm that Gen Z political engagement in this province is not entirely undocumented. The present study differs from, and extends, this existing local scholarship in three respects: it uses a purely qualitative, thematic-analytic design rather than a mixed-methods approach (Osumo et al., 2025); it focuses specifically on the standards and criteria Gen Z voters apply when evaluating candidates for elective office, rather than on social media use in general (Osumo et al., 2025) or on youth leadership and mentoring outside the electoral context (Osumo & Letigio, 2025); and it draws on a purposive sample spanning four municipalities — Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan — rather than a single locale. Accordingly, the gap this study addresses is more precisely framed as a gap in candidate-evaluation standards among Gen Z voters across North Cotabato, rather than a claim that Gen Z political engagement in the province is wholly unexamined.

Building on this more precisely framed gap, this study uses thematic analysis to examine the lived experiences and perspectives of Generation Z voters in North Cotabato, offering insight into how young people evaluate political candidates and make electoral decisions within their communities. Specifically, the study is guided by two research questions: (1) What leadership qualities do Gen Z voters in North Cotabato prioritize when evaluating political candidates? and (2) How do personal values, social influences, and digital exposure shape these evaluative standards? The findings aim to contribute to broader discussions on youth political participation and support Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong

Institutions) by promoting inclusive democratic participation; results will be disseminated through academic publications, conferences, and policy-oriented forums.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is interpreted through two complementary theoretical lenses: Lifestyle Politics Theory and Political Socialization Theory. These theories were selected, rather than a general political-behavior or youth-civic-engagement framework, because together they capture both the personal-values dimension and the socially shaped dimension of how Generation Z voters develop standards for evaluating political candidates—dimensions that emerged as central to the interview data during coding.

Lifestyle Politics Theory holds that individuals increasingly integrate personal values, ethical standards, and everyday identity choices into their political judgments and civic participation, such that political behavior becomes an extension of how individuals choose to live (Giddens, 1991; Halkier et al., 2011). In this study, this theory is expected to explain why Gen Z voters evaluate leaders on authenticity, consistency between words and actions, empathy, and value alignment—standards rooted in personal moral judgment rather than institutional criteria alone.

Political Socialization Theory explains how individuals develop political beliefs, attitudes, and expectations through exposure to social institutions and experiences, including family, education, media, and peer networks (Biswas, 2025). In this study, this theory is expected to explain why Gen Z voters' expectations of transparency, accountability, and governance competence are shaped by their exposure to educational institutions, social media discourse, and civic environments, rather than by personal values alone.

The two theories are treated as complementary rather than competing: Lifestyle Politics Theory accounts for the values-based, identity-driven standards Gen Z voters apply, while Political Socialization Theory accounts for how exposure to information environments and social institutions shapes the content and confidence of those standards. Both theories informed the initial coding and thematic development described in the Methods section below and are revisited throughout the Results and Discussion to interpret each theme.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study used a thematic analysis design (Braun & Clarke, 2023) to explore Generation Z's political engagement in North Cotabato, focusing on the standards and criteria participants use to select political candidates. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting

patterns (themes) within a data set, moving iteratively from initial coding to candidate themes and, finally, to a thematic structure (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This design suits the study because it allows researchers to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts of how lifestyle choices, personal values, and social interactions shape political decisions. By coding and thematically organizing participants' responses, the study identifies the factors, priorities, and perspectives that guided young voters' evaluations of candidates in the 2025 provincial and national elections, offering insights that a purely quantitative approach could not capture. The researchers initially considered narrative analysis (Kaluza, 2023; Nigar, 2020) because it emphasizes lived experience, but ultimately chose thematic analysis because the research questions called for identifying patterns across participants rather than the sustained analysis of individual life stories that narrative inquiry entails.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The study involved ten (10) Generation Z college students, aged 18 to 23 years, who were purposively selected from four municipalities in North Cotabato: Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan. All participants were enrolled in higher education institutions and were selected based on their ability to articulate the standards, considerations, and experiences they use to evaluate political candidates. Eligibility was established through preliminary screening conversations conducted before the formal interviews.

The participants were recruited from seven higher education institutions: Central Mindanao Colleges, University of Southern Mindanao–Kidapawan City Campus, University of Southern Mindanao–Main Campus in Kabacan, Notre Dame of Kidapawan College, Kidapawan Doctor's College, Inc., Colegio de Kidapawan, and Makilala Institute of Science and Technology. Their academic backgrounds represented diverse fields of study, including Education, Business Administration, Public Administration, Psychology, and Criminology. This disciplinary diversity was considered relevant to the study because students from different academic backgrounds may encounter and interpret political, social, and civic issues through varied educational and disciplinary perspectives.

By year level, four (4) participants were first-year students, two (2) were second-year students, two (2) were third-year students, and two (2) were fourth-year students. The participants were distributed across the four target municipalities to provide variation in local political and social contexts. This distribution aligned with the study's purpose of documenting the standards Generation Z college students use to evaluate political candidates across different local settings in North Cotabato, rather than limiting the inquiry to a single institution or municipality.

To protect confidentiality and uphold ethical standards, each participant was assigned an

identification code from IDI_P1 to IDI_P10. These codes were used throughout the interview transcripts, data analysis, and presentation of findings. No participant was identified by name in the manuscript.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, the study protocol, including the semi-structured interview guide and informed consent materials, underwent ethical review and was approved by the Central Mindanao Colleges–Research Ethics Board (CMC-REB) under Approval/Protocol No. CMC-REB 0010-26-24, dated October 26, 2023. The ethical review ensured that the study's procedures for participant recruitment, informed consent, confidentiality, data collection, and reporting were consistent with applicable research ethics standards.

Before each interview, participants were fully briefed regarding the purpose and nature of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the procedures involved, and the measures adopted to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or adverse consequence. The researchers obtained informed consent from each participant before the interview began.

To protect participants' identities, all participants were assigned anonymized identification codes, IDI_P1 through IDI_P10. The team used these codes consistently in the interview transcripts, data analysis materials, and presentation of findings. No personally identifying information was disclosed in the manuscript or in any research output. The team handled participant information and research data confidentially and used them solely for the purposes of the study.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (IDIs), which provided participants with an opportunity to articulate their experiences, values, and perspectives on political engagement and candidate evaluation in their own words. The interviews were conducted primarily in Cebuano/Bisaya, the participants' commonly used first language, with code-switching into English when participants preferred it. Significant statements presented in the Results and Discussion sections are retained in the original language and accompanied by the researchers' English translations to preserve the intended meaning and contextual nuances of participants' responses.

The researchers developed the semi-structured interview guide based on the study's research questions and patterned it on the theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. The questions were organized to elicit participants' accounts of the personal values, social influences, political considerations, and lifestyle-related factors that inform their evaluation of political candidates. Prior to the formal interviews, preliminary interviews were conducted with selected prospective participants to

assess their capacity to understand and respond to the interview questions and to identify their information needs and areas requiring clarification. The team used insights from this preliminary process to refine the wording, sequence, and comprehensibility of the interview questions. This process helped ensure that the interview guide was appropriate to the participants' age, educational background, and capacity to provide meaningful accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

Individual interviews were conducted in a supportive and comfortable setting that allowed participants to speak openly and reflectively about their views. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The one-on-one format minimized peer influence and gave participants sufficient privacy to express their political perspectives, personal values, and criteria for evaluating candidates. With participants' consent, the interviews were recorded for transcription and qualitative analysis.

The semi-structured format provided consistency across interviews while allowing the researchers to pursue relevant responses through probing and follow-up questions. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences and explain how their personal values, social interactions, information sources, and lifestyle considerations shape the standards they apply when evaluating political candidates. This approach enabled the researchers to obtain both comparable accounts across participants and detailed narratives reflecting individual perspectives.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed qualitative data from the in-depth interviews (IDIs) using thematic analysis following Colaizzi (1978). The analysis began with transcribing all recorded interviews. The researchers repeatedly reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the data's breadth and depth. During the initial coding phase, the researchers identified meaningful statements related to Generation Z voters' political perceptions, evaluative standards, and voting preferences and assigned descriptive codes.

After initial coding, the team compared related codes and grouped them into categories representing recurring patterns of meaning across participants. Through collaborative discussions, the researchers merged, refined, and organized overlapping and conceptually related categories into broader themes. The researchers resolved coding disagreements through discussion and consensus, continuously comparing codes and emerging themes against the original transcripts to ensure the final themes remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Researchers selected significant statements for the results tables based on their relevance and clarity in articulating the evaluative standard represented by a particular theme. Where multiple statements from the same participant provided meaningful variation or

nuance, more than one statement was retained. Consequently, some themes were illustrated primarily by one or two participants rather than by all ten participants. This distribution reflects the qualitative nature of the inquiry and is reported transparently in the Results and Discussion sections and considered in the study's limitations.

The researchers translated interviews conducted in Cebuano/Bisaya into English for analysis and reporting. To ensure translation fidelity, the researchers conducted a bilingual verification and back-translation process, comparing the English translations with the original Cebuano/Bisaya statements. The researchers discussed discrepancies in meaning, terminology, idiomatic expressions, and contextual interpretation and resolved them by consensus. Where necessary, the original-language statement was revisited to ensure that the English version accurately represented the participant's intended meaning. Both the original Cebuano/Bisaya wording and its corresponding English translation were retained in the research records, while translated excerpts were included in the manuscript to improve accessibility for an international readership.

In the results tables, the first-column label, "*Theme*," identifies the specific evaluative pattern derived from the participants' accounts. The second column, "*Descriptive Label*," provides a concise interpretive gloss of the identified pattern to facilitate reference in the narrative discussion. This labeling system is a descriptive convention developed for the present study and does not represent the thematic-network hierarchy of basic, organizing, and global themes proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001).

To establish the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers applied strategies consistent with the qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability described by Lincoln and Guba (1988). Data saturation was used to assess data adequacy, with saturation understood as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantially new codes, categories, or themes. Saturation was judged to have been reached by the tenth interview, consistent with reported saturation ranges for relatively homogeneous and narrowly focused qualitative samples (Francis et al., 2010; Palinkas et al., 2014; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Credibility was further strengthened through member checking, in which participants were given an opportunity to review and clarify the researchers' interpretation of their accounts. Peer debriefing was also used through discussions among the student researchers and the research adviser about the coding process, emerging categories, thematic interpretations, and potential researcher biases. These discussions provided opportunities to challenge preliminary interpretations and ensure that the themes were sufficiently supported by the interview data.

The student researchers maintained an audit trail throughout the research process to document the progression from raw interview data to transcripts,

initial codes, categories, themes, and final interpretations. The student researchers coded collaboratively under the supervision of the research adviser. The team addressed interpretation differences through consensus and constant comparison with the original transcripts. These procedures enhanced the dependability and confirmability of the findings by providing a transparent record of how analytical decisions were made and how the final themes were derived from participants' accounts.

Taken together, systematic thematic analysis, bilingual verification, member checking, peer debriefing, collaborative coding, constant comparison, data saturation, and an audit trail provided multiple safeguards to ensure the findings accurately represented the perspectives of the Generation Z college students who participated in the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings organized by theme, drawing on the coding process described in the Methods section, to address the study's two research questions: the leadership qualities Gen Z voters in North Cotabato prioritize, and how personal values, social influences, and digital exposure shape these standards.

4.1 Political Leaders' Quality Preferences of Gen Z Voters

Elections remain a crucial feature of the Philippines' democratic political system, where the right to suffrage allows citizens to select leaders who represent their interests and aspirations. As the number of Generation Z voters grows, understanding how this demographic evaluates political leadership has become increasingly important. According to Commission on Elections statistics, Gen Z voters represent a significant portion of the electorate, making their preferences influential in electoral outcomes.

Furthermore, the expansion of digital media has reshaped how young voters evaluate political figures. Exposure to diverse political perspectives on online platforms contributes to stronger political awareness among young individuals (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that Gen Z voters evaluate political leaders based on four major qualities: Consistency in Public Service, Empathy for People, Sense of Accountability, and Competence. These qualities reflect both ethical expectations and practical leadership capabilities.

Table 1. Political Leaders' Quality Preferences of Gen Z Voters

Theme	Descriptive Label	Significant Statements	Interpretation
Consistency in Public Service	Reliability in Leadership	<i>"Usahay mutan-aw sa politician nga actual action over time kung consistent ba sila."</i> → Sometimes I observe politicians' actions over time to see if they are consistent. (IDI_P4) <i>"Kung tinuod ba ilang leadership o slogans lang."</i> → Whether their leadership is real or just slogans. (IDI_P6) <i>"Gen Z voters recognize inconsistencies between words and actions."</i> (IDI_P8) <i>"Superficial promises without concrete plans are easy to identify."</i> (IDI_P4) <i>"Political gimmicks become visible when leaders fail to deliver."</i> (IDI_P9)	Gen Z voters evaluate leaders through long-term behavioral consistency. Trust is developed when promises align with actions, indicating authenticity and reliability in leadership.
Empathy for People	Compassionate Leadership	<i>"Ganahan ko og leader nga naay tinuod nga malasakit sa tao."</i> → I prefer a leader who genuinely cares for people. (IDI_P7) <i>"Ang mga tao nga dili tagdon sa sistema kinahanglan paminawon."</i> → Those ignored by the system should be heard. (IDI_P9) <i>"Leaders should understand people's struggles."</i> (IDI_P5) <i>"Care for people shows sincerity in leadership."</i> (IDI_P8) <i>"Empathy reflects genuine concern for social issues."</i> (IDI_P10)	Empathy is viewed as an essential moral quality of leadership. Gen Z values leaders who understand societal struggles and demonstrate compassion toward marginalized communities.
Sense of Accountability	Ethical Responsibility	<i>"If the leader admits mistakes, that is authenticity."</i> (IDI_P5) <i>"Admitting mistakes and acting ethically builds integrity."</i> (IDI_P2) <i>"Leaders should be open about policies."</i> (IDI_P10) <i>"Transparency builds trust among voters."</i> (IDI_P9) <i>"Responsible leaders accept both success and failure."</i> (IDI_P8)	Accountability is interpreted as transparency and ethical responsibility in governance. Leaders who openly acknowledge mistakes are perceived as more trustworthy and credible.

Theme	Descriptive Label	Significant Statements	Interpretation
Competence	Governance Capability	<i>"I need to know if they understand proper procedures."</i> (IDI_P2) <i>"Leaders should know how to implement programs."</i> (IDI_P2) <i>"Mulat sa katotohanan in reyalidad."</i> → Aware of reality. (IDI_P6) <i>"Leaders should have a clear vision for society."</i> (IDI_P6) <i>"Knowledge and awareness are necessary in leadership."</i> (IDI_P6)	Competence refers to the ability of leaders to apply knowledge and skills in governance. Gen Z values leaders capable of addressing societal challenges through informed decision-making.

The findings in Table 1 can be better understood through the lenses of Lifestyle Politics Theory and Political Socialization Theory, which provide frameworks for explaining how Generation Z forms political preferences and evaluates leadership qualities. The four themes identified in the findings—Consistency in Public Service, Empathy for People, Sense of Accountability, and Competence—reflect the intersection of personal values, lived experiences, and social influences shaping Gen Z's political perspectives.

Consistency in Public Service

(This theme was supported by statements from four of the ten participants: IDI_P4, P6, P8, and P9.)

The theme Consistency in Public Service, as represented by the global theme Reliability in Leadership, reflects the application of Lifestyle Politics Theory. This theory suggests that individuals integrate their personal values and ethical standards into political judgments and civic participation (Giddens, 1991; Halkier et al., 2011). In the present study, Gen Z voters evaluate leaders based on whether their actions consistently reflect their promises and public commitments.

Participants emphasized the importance of observing political behavior over time. One respondent explained, *"Usahay mutan-aw sa politician nga actual action over time kung consistent ba sila"* (IDI_P4), indicating that leadership credibility is assessed through long-term observation rather than campaign statements alone. Similarly, another participant questioned the authenticity of political messaging by stating, *"Kung tinuod ba ilang leadership o slogans lang"* (IDI_P6). These statements demonstrate how Gen Z voters actively evaluate the alignment between political discourse and actual governance.

This evaluation process aligns with Lifestyle Politics Theory because Gen Z incorporates authenticity and integrity as personal values in their political decision-making. The emphasis on identifying *"superficial promises without concrete plans"* (IDI_P4) and recognizing when *"political gimmicks become visible when leaders fail to deliver"* (IDI_P9) reflects the integration of ethical judgment into electoral choices. This finding supports Tanner (2025), who noted that Generation Z seeks genuine and authentic experiences, including in political leadership. Furthermore, Cheng et al. (2023) explain that Gen Z's digital literacy enables them to compare political statements and actions through

accessible online information, strengthening their capacity to detect inconsistencies.

Taken together, these responses suggest that Gen Z voters in North Cotabato engage in a form of lifestyle politics in which political trust is built on perceived authenticity and consistency in leadership behavior.

Empathy for People

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P5, P7, P8, P9, and P10.)

The theme Empathy for People, represented through the global theme Compassionate Leadership, also reflects principles of Lifestyle Politics Theory. Giddens's (1991) study found that individuals increasingly connect personal moral values to public issues, particularly when evaluating leadership decisions that affect social welfare.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of leaders demonstrating genuine concern for the public. One respondent expressed, *"Ganahan ko og leader nga naay tinuod nga malasakit sa tao"* (IDI_P7), highlighting that compassion is a key indicator of leadership sincerity. Another participant noted that *"Ang mga tao nga dili tagdon sa sistema kinahanglan paminawon"* (IDI_P9), emphasizing the expectation that leaders must listen to marginalized communities.

These statements illustrate how Gen Z voters interpret political leadership through the lens of social responsibility and human-centered governance. For participants, empathy signals authenticity and ethical leadership, as reflected in statements such as *"care for people shows sincerity in leadership"* (IDI_P8) and *"empathy reflects genuine concern for social issues"* (IDI_P10).

This finding aligns with Kurniawan et al. (2024), who observed that Gen Z tends to align political preferences with issues that reflect their social identities and values. Similarly, Macalawi and Motalib (2025) found that Filipino Gen Z voters prioritize policies that address social concerns such as healthcare and public welfare. These studies reinforce the idea that Gen Z's political decisions are influenced by personal values connected to broader social issues.

These responses support Lifestyle Politics Theory, showing that Gen Z voters in North Cotabato evaluate leaders on ethical values such as compassion, inclusivity, and social awareness.

Sense of Accountability

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P2, P5, P8, P9, and P10.)

The theme Sense of Accountability, reflected in the global theme Ethical Responsibility, can be interpreted through Political Socialization Theory, which explains how individuals develop political beliefs through social experiences and exposure to political discourse (Biswas, 2025). Through interactions with media, educational institutions, and social networks, Gen Z develops expectations of transparency and ethical governance, particularly in the municipalities of North Cotabato.

Participants emphasized that leaders should demonstrate honesty and openness in governance. One respondent explained, *"If the leader admits mistakes, that is authenticity"* (IDI_P5), suggesting that acknowledging errors increases political credibility. Another participant reinforced this view by stating that *"admitting mistakes and acting ethically builds integrity"* (IDI_P2).

Participants also considered transparency an essential characteristic of accountable leadership. Respondents noted that *"leaders should be open about policies"* (IDI_P10) and that *"transparency builds trust among voters"* (IDI_P9). One participant further emphasized that *"responsible leaders accept both success and failure"* (IDI_P8), indicating that accountability involves both ethical conduct and responsibility for policy outcomes.

These expectations reflect how political information environments shape Gen Z's attitudes toward governance. Social media and digital platforms allow young voters to observe political behavior closely and engage in public discourse about leadership performance. This finding agrees with Velasco (2024), who argues that social media has increased political awareness and participation among young voters by providing platforms for critique and discussion. Likewise, Focardi (2024) emphasizes that Gen Z voters in North Cotabato increasingly demand transparency and accountability from political leaders.

These patterns suggest that Gen Z's expectations of accountability are shaped by social exposure to political discourse and information, consistent with Political Socialization Theory.

Competence

(This theme was supported by statements from two of the ten participants, IDI_P2 and P6, and should be read with that limited representation in mind.)

The theme Competence, reflected in the global theme Governance Capability, further supports the relevance of Political Socialization Theory in explaining Gen Z's political evaluations. This theory suggests that individuals develop expectations about leadership effectiveness through exposure to political institutions, public discourse, and social learning (Biswas, 2025).

Participants emphasized that effective leaders must possess knowledge, strategic vision, and practical governance skills. One respondent noted, *"I need to*

know if they understand proper procedures" (IDI_P2), indicating the expectation that leaders must be knowledgeable about governance processes. Another participant explained that *"leaders should know how to implement programs"* (IDI_P2), highlighting the importance of translating policy proposals into actionable programs.

Participants also emphasized situational awareness and realistic governance strategies. One respondent stated that leaders must be *"mulat sa katotohanan in reyalidad"* (IDI_P6), meaning that leadership decisions must reflect real societal conditions.

Additionally, respondents noted that *"leaders should have a clear vision for society"* and that *"knowledge and awareness are necessary in leadership"* (IDI_P6).

These insights reflect how Gen Z evaluates leaders based on their capacity to address real-world challenges. This finding aligns with Wahyudi et al. (2024b), who found that young voters tend to favor candidates who demonstrate strong leadership and practical governance capabilities. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2023) emphasize that Gen Z's exposure to digital information encourages critical evaluation of political platforms and leadership competence.

Taken together, these results suggest that Gen Z voters in North Cotabato develop expectations for competent leadership through exposure to political information and public discourse, reinforcing the principles of Political Socialization Theory.

Overall, the findings suggest that Lifestyle Politics Theory and Political Socialization Theory complement each other in explaining Gen Z's political perspectives. Lifestyle Politics Theory explains how personal values, such as authenticity, empathy, and ethical leadership, shape Gen Z's evaluation of political candidates. Meanwhile, Political Socialization Theory explains how exposure to political information, social media discourse, and civic environments influences their expectations of transparency, accountability, and governance competence.

Together, these theories show that Gen Z voters evaluate political leaders in North Cotabato through a combination of personal values and socially shaped political awareness. The themes identified in this study illustrate how young voters integrate ethical considerations, social concerns, and governance capability when selecting candidates, reflecting a multidimensional approach to political decision-making in the contemporary electoral landscape.

4.2 Factors Influencing Gen Z Voting Preferences

The analysis of participants' responses in Table 2 revealed four additional themes that explain how Generation Z voters evaluate political candidates: Personal Value Representation, Political Education, Candidate Experience, and Platform of Governance. These themes demonstrate that Gen Z voters approach political participation through a combination of value-based judgment, informed

awareness, leadership evaluation, and issue-based governance expectations. The findings further highlight the role of personal identity, education, and exposure to

political information in shaping electoral decision-making.

Table 2. Factors Influencing Gen Z Voting Preferences

Theme	Descriptive Label	Significant Statements	Interpretation
Personal Value Representation	Value Alignment in Political Representation	<i>"Dapat align sa imong values ang politiko."</i> → Politicians should align with your values. (IDI_P4) <i>"Politicians represent the people."</i> (IDI_P5) <i>"A politician should represent my identity."</i> (IDI_P6) <i>"Shared values make leadership more personal."</i> (IDI_P7) <i>"Candidates should advocate the issues important to voters."</i> (IDI_P8)	Voting preference is influenced by value alignment between voters and candidates, reinforcing the idea that political representation should reflect personal beliefs and priorities.
Political Education	Educational Influence on Political Choice	<i>"Education helps me understand deeper political issues."</i> (IDI_P1) <i>"Education helps choose better leaders."</i> (IDI_P2) <i>"We are familiar with the flow of politics because of education."</i> (IDI_P3) <i>"Education shapes political understanding."</i> (IDI_P9) <i>"Learning influences our choices in elections."</i> (IDI_P8)	Political education improves voters' understanding of governance and societal issues, enabling them to make informed decisions during elections.
Candidate Experience	Experience-Innovation Balance in Leadership	<i>"Experience brings wisdom."</i> (IDI_P5) <i>"Experienced leaders can navigate complex issues."</i> (IDI_P3) <i>"Fresh perspectives challenge outdated beliefs."</i> (IDI_P2) <i>"Innovation is important for modernization."</i> (IDI_P1) <i>"The ideal leader balances experience and innovation."</i> (IDI_P6)	Gen Z voters balance experience and innovation when evaluating candidates. Both established expertise and fresh perspectives are considered valuable in leadership.
Platform of Governance	Policy Agenda and Governance Vision	<i>"I look for candidates focusing on climate change and equality."</i> (IDI_P8) <i>"Candidates should address social issues."</i> (IDI_P5) <i>"Politicians should provide clear platforms."</i> (IDI_P7) <i>"Solutions to societal issues matter."</i> (IDI_P10) <i>"Platforms guide voting decisions."</i> (IDI_P2)	Governance platforms influence voting decisions because they provide concrete solutions to societal issues important to Gen Z voters.

Personal Value Representation

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8.)

The theme Personal Value Representation highlights the importance of value alignment between voters and political candidates. Participants expressed that political leaders should reflect the beliefs, identities, and priorities of the people they represent. One respondent stated, *"Dapat align sa imong values ang politiko"* (IDI_P4), indicating that voters prefer leaders whose principles resonate with their own moral and social perspectives. Similarly, another participant emphasized the representative function of leadership by explaining that *"politicians represent the people"* (IDI_P5).

Some participants articulated that leadership should reflect personal and social identity, as illustrated by the statement *"a politician should represent my identity"* (IDI_P6). Others highlighted the relational dimension of leadership, noting that *"shared values make leadership more personal"* (IDI_P7). Participants also recognized that political representation should address the issues that voters consider important, as reflected in the statement *"candidates should advocate the issues important to voters"* (IDI_P8).

These responses suggest that Gen Z voters evaluate candidates through the lens of value-based representation, where political preference is influenced by perceived alignment between the candidate's principles and the voter's personal beliefs. This

finding supports and emphasizes the principles of Lifestyle Politics Theory (Giddens, 1991; Halkier et al., 2011), which explains that individuals increasingly integrate ethical values and personal identity into political participation. In this context, voting becomes an extension of everyday values, where individuals choose leaders who represent their worldview.

The findings also align with those of Kurniawan et al. (2024), who found that Gen Z tends to align political choices with personal and social identities. When voters perceive that a candidate shares their values, they are more likely to develop trust and political support for that candidate. Additionally, Wahyudi et al. (2024b) noted that positive candidate images and value-driven leadership significantly influence support from younger voters. This is also consistent with Cabahug et al. (2023), who found that Filipino Millennials and Generation Z share value orientations that inform their broader social and civic judgments.

However, the findings slightly contradict the observation of Batara et al. (2021) and Graison (2024), who suggested that youth voting behavior is often influenced by popularity, survey rankings, or perceived electability. In contrast, the participants in this study emphasized value alignment and personal representation rather than popularity as the basis for political preference. This suggests that Gen Z voters may demonstrate more principled and value-driven political evaluation than previously assumed.

On the whole, these responses indicate that political representation for Gen Z is not only institutional but also personal, where leadership legitimacy is closely tied to shared values and identity representation.

Political Education

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P1, P2, P3, P8, and P9.)

Another important theme that emerged from the analysis is Political Education, which participants associated with developing informed political awareness and critical decision-making. Several respondents emphasized that education serves as a significant factor in understanding political systems and governance issues. One participant stated that *“education helps me understand deeper political issues”* (IDI_P1), suggesting that academic learning provides a framework for interpreting political events and policies.

Similarly, another respondent explained that *“education helps choose better leaders”* (IDI_P2), indicating that educational exposure influences electoral judgment. Participants also noted that *“we are familiar with the flow of politics because of education”* (IDI_P3), emphasizing that political knowledge acquired through education contributes to their awareness of governance processes. Other respondents reinforced this perspective by stating that *“education shapes political understanding”* (IDI_P9) and that *“learning influences our choices in elections”* (IDI_P8). This is broadly consistent with research from other national contexts documenting the role of political education in shaping political participation (Chen & Madni, 2024).

These statements suggest that political education enhances Gen Z’s ability to analyze leadership qualities, policy issues, and political structures present in the municipalities of North Cotabato. This finding is consistent with Political Socialization Theory (Biswas, 2025), which explains that political beliefs and behaviors develop through exposure to institutions such as schools, media, and social environments. Educational institutions serve as significant agents of political socialization by providing knowledge about governance, civic responsibilities, and democratic participation.

The findings also agree with Cheng et al. (2023), who emphasized that digital literacy and education significantly influence young voters’ engagement with political information. Individuals with higher levels of political awareness are more likely to critically evaluate political messages encountered on social media platforms. Furthermore, the results support Velasco et al. (2024) that contemporary youth use information sources, including digital media and educational institutions, to deepen their understanding of political issues.

Moreover, the findings align with the broader context described by McCrindle and Fell (2019) and Eldridge (2025), which characterize Generation Z as a highly informed generation because of their constant

access to digital information. Because Gen Z is exposed to diverse political perspectives through both education and online platforms, they develop stronger analytical capacities in evaluating leadership and governance.

These patterns indicate that education functions as a key mechanism in shaping Gen Z’s political awareness and electoral decision-making.

Candidate Experience

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P1, P2, P3, P5, and P6.)

The theme Candidate Experience reflects the nuanced way Gen Z evaluates leadership capability. Participants recognized the value of both political experience and innovative thinking when assessing potential leaders. One participant stated that *“experience brings wisdom”* (IDI_P5), emphasizing that seasoned leaders may possess the knowledge required to address complex political challenges. Another respondent added that *“experienced leaders can navigate complex issues”* (IDI_P3), highlighting the importance of institutional familiarity and practical governance skills in North Cotabato.

However, participants also acknowledged the importance of leadership innovation. One respondent noted that *“fresh perspectives challenge outdated beliefs”* (IDI_P2), suggesting that new leaders can introduce progressive ideas that address contemporary societal needs. Another participant emphasized that *“innovation is important for modernization”* (IDI_P1), particularly in addressing emerging social and technological challenges in North Cotabato.

Ultimately, participants recognized the need for balance, as reflected in the statement *“the ideal leader balances experience and innovation”* (IDI_P6). This indicates that Gen Z voters do not view experience and innovation as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary qualities that strengthen leadership effectiveness in North Cotabato.

This finding partially agrees with Wahyudi et al. (2024b), who emphasized that young voters prefer candidates who demonstrate strong leadership capability and competence. Experience contributes to credibility and governance expertise, a pattern Haime et al. (2022) also reported in their study linking candidate experience to electoral success. At the same time, the findings complicate a simple generational-affinity account of candidate preference: Sevi (2021) found that young voters do not automatically prefer younger candidates, suggesting that experience and perceived competence, rather than age similarity alone, drive candidate evaluation. However, the findings also extend the literature by highlighting that Gen Z voters value both innovative thinking and progressive leadership approaches.

Furthermore, the emphasis on modernization and new perspectives aligns with McCrindle and Fell (2019), who describe Generation Z as a generation shaped by rapid technological change and global connectivity. Because they live in an environment characterized by constant innovation, Gen Z tends to

favor leaders who demonstrate adaptability and forward-thinking governance.

Taken together, these responses suggest that Gen Z voters in North Cotabato adopt a balanced view of leadership, recognizing both the strategic value of experience and the transformative potential of innovation.

Platform of Governance

(This theme was supported by statements from five of the ten participants: IDI_P2, P5, P7, P8, and P10.)

The theme Platform of Governance emphasizes the importance of policy agendas and concrete governance plans in shaping voting preferences. Participants repeatedly emphasized that leadership decisions should be guided by clear platforms that address societal issues. One respondent stated, *"I look for candidates focusing on climate change and equality"* (IDI_P8), indicating that policy priorities play a significant role in candidate evaluation.

Similarly, participants stressed that leaders must address pressing social issues, as reflected in the statement *"candidates should address social issues"* (IDI_P5). Others emphasized the importance of transparency in policy agendas, stating that *"politicians should provide clear platforms"* (IDI_P7). Participants also highlighted that *"solutions to societal issues matter"* (IDI_P10) and that *"platforms guide voting decisions"* (IDI_P2).

These findings suggest that Gen Z voters prioritize candidates who articulate clear policy directions and demonstrate commitment to addressing societal concerns. This perspective is consistent with Lifestyle Politics Theory (Giddens, 1991), which emphasizes that political participation is often guided by personal values related to social and environmental issues.

The findings also agree with Macalawi and Motalib (2025), who found that Filipino Gen Z voters pay significant attention to candidates' platforms, particularly those related to healthcare and social welfare. Additionally, the emphasis on issue-based leadership aligns with Focardi (2024), who noted that Gen Z voters are motivated by policy principles rather than traditional political loyalty.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce the observations of David et al. (2019) and Cadayday et al. (2024) that social media has increased public access to political

platforms, allowing voters to compare policy proposals more easily. However, the findings also indirectly address concerns raised by Sugihartono (2024) and Cadayday (2024) regarding misinformation in online political discourse. Despite these risks, participants in this study demonstrated an ability to critically evaluate policy agendas rather than relying solely on superficial political messaging.

Thus, the results indicate that Gen Z voters value issue-based leadership, where governance platforms serve as a primary guide for electoral decision-making.

Overall, the themes Personal Value Representation, Political Education, Candidate Experience, and Platform of Governance reveal that Gen Z voters adopt a multidimensional approach to political evaluation. Their decisions are shaped by the intersection of personal values, educational influences, leadership capability, and issue-based governance priorities.

The findings reinforce the relevance of Lifestyle Politics Theory, which explains how personal values and social issues influence political engagement, and Political Socialization Theory, which highlights the role of education, media, and social environments in shaping political attitudes.

Taken together, these results suggest that Generation Z voters are increasingly value-driven, informed, and issue-oriented in their political decision-making, reflecting a shift toward more reflective and principled participation in democratic processes.

4.3 Impact of Social Media on Gen Z Political Decision-Making

Table 3 presents three significant themes describing how social media influences Generation Z voters' political decision-making: Encouraging Information Verification, Political Promotion Through Content, and Political Propaganda Dissemination. These themes demonstrate that while social media has become a dominant platform for political information and engagement, Gen Z voters do not passively consume online content. Instead, they actively evaluate digital information, assess influencers' credibility, and try to avoid manipulation in the political sphere. These findings reflect the growing role of digital environments in shaping political attitudes and promoting and developing critical awareness among young voters.

Table 3. Impact of Social Media on Gen Z Political Decision-making

Theme	Descriptive Label	Significant Statements	Interpretation
Encouraging Information Verification	Digital Information Literacy	<i>"Many Filipinos fall for false information online."</i> (IDI_P5)	Digital literacy encourages Gen Z voters to verify political information before accepting it as credible.
		<i>"I check multiple news sources."</i> (IDI_P5)	
		<i>"Cross-referencing information helps identify bias."</i> (IDI_P6)	
		<i>"Fact-checking prevents misinformation."</i> (IDI_P6)	
		<i>"I avoid sharing unreliable information."</i> (IDI_P6)	

Theme	Descriptive Label	Significant Statements	Interpretation
Political Promotion Through Content	Digital Political Influence	<i>"Misleading political content is everywhere."</i> (IDI_P5)	Social media influencers play a major role in shaping political awareness, though their influence may be affected by bias or personal interests.
		<i>"Influencers sometimes promote politicians."</i> (IDI_P5)	
		<i>"Some influencers are trustworthy."</i> (IDI_P5)	
		<i>"Others promote politicians for money."</i> (IDI_P5)	
		<i>"Influencers have wide digital reach."</i> (IDI_P5)	
Political Propaganda Dissemination	Digital Political Manipulation	<i>"Influencers have power to persuade many people."</i> (IDI_P2)	Social media can spread political propaganda, but Gen Z voters attempt to counter this influence by verifying candidates' credentials and track records.
		<i>"Being conscious helps avoid manipulation."</i> (IDI_P2)	
		<i>"Influencers campaign for candidates on TikTok."</i> (IDI_P4)	
		<i>"Researching credentials is necessary."</i> (IDI_P4)	
		<i>"Track records should be verified."</i> (IDI_P4)	

Encouraging Information Verification

(This theme was supported by statements from two of the ten participants, IDI_P5 and P6, and should be read as an in-depth account from two participants rather than a pattern established across the full sample; see Limitations.)

The first theme, Encouraging Information Verification, highlights the role of digital literacy in shaping Gen Z's approach to political information encountered on social media. Participants recognized that misinformation is widespread on online platforms, prompting them to develop strategies to verify information before accepting it as credible. One respondent noted, *"Many Filipinos fall for false information online"* (IDI_P5), demonstrating awareness of the prevalence of misinformation in the digital space.

To address this concern, participants emphasized the importance of verifying information from multiple sources. As one participant explained, *"I check multiple news sources"* (IDI_P5), while another respondent added that *"cross-referencing information helps identify bias"* (IDI_P6).

Participants also acknowledged the importance of fact-checking, with one respondent stating that *"fact-checking prevents misinformation"* (IDI_P6). Furthermore, participants expressed responsibility in their digital behavior, as reflected in the statement *"I avoid sharing unreliable information"* (IDI_P6).

These responses indicate that Gen Z voters engage with political content critically and reflectively. This finding is consistent with Cheng et al. (2023), which emphasizes that digital literacy plays a crucial role in shaping political engagement among young voters. Individuals with higher levels of digital literacy are more likely to evaluate political information critically rather than accept it at face value.

The findings also align with Simonson (2021), who observed that Gen Z tends to be less susceptible to misinformation than older generations because they are more accustomed to navigating digital environments. Similarly, the results reinforce the arguments of McCrindle and Fell (2019) and Eldridge (2025) that, as digital natives, Generation Z has developed the capacity

to engage with information critically due to their constant exposure to online platforms.

From a theoretical perspective, this theme aligns with Political Socialization Theory, which posits that exposure to media environments shapes individuals' political attitudes and behaviors (Biswas, 2025). Social media functions as a modern agent of political socialization, influencing how young voters acquire information and develop political awareness. However, the findings extend the theory by showing that Gen Z voters do not simply absorb information but actively filter and verify political content (Osuno et al., 2025). Thus, the findings emphasize that digital literacy enables Gen Z voters to navigate political information online responsibly and critically.

Political Promotion Through Content

(All five significant statements for this theme were drawn from a single participant, IDI_P5. This theme is therefore best read as an illustrative individual case rather than a group-level pattern shared across participants; see Limitations for further discussion of this concentration.)

The second theme, Political Promotion Through Content, highlights how digital personalities and content creators shape political awareness among Gen Z voters. Participants acknowledged that influencers often promote political causes on social media platforms. One respondent noted that *"misleading political content is everywhere"* (IDI_P5), suggesting that online platforms are saturated with politically motivated content.

Participants also recognized that influencers sometimes promote political candidates. As one participant stated, *"influencers sometimes promote politicians"* (IDI_P5). However, participants demonstrated nuanced perceptions of influencer credibility. Some respondents expressed that *"some influencers are trustworthy"* (IDI_P5), while others acknowledged potential conflicts of interest, stating that *"others promote politicians for money"* (IDI_P5). Despite these concerns, participants recognized the significant reach of influencers, with one respondent noting that *"influencers have wide digital reach"* (IDI_P5).

These responses indicate that Gen Z voters recognize the power of influencer culture in shaping public opinion while simultaneously questioning the motivations behind political endorsements. This finding supports Dewi et al. (2023), who emphasized that social media content creators and influencers play an important role in political discourse by promoting candidates, discussing political issues, and shaping online narratives, and is consistent with Solihat (2024), who found that Gen Z's digital communication practices actively shape their political participation rather than merely reflecting it.

However, the findings also partially contradict Wahyudi (2024a), who suggested that information received through influencers is often non-substantive and may discourage critical evaluation of political platforms. In contrast, participants in this study demonstrated awareness that influencer promotions may be driven by financial incentives, suggesting a more critical approach to evaluating such content.

Furthermore, the findings agree with David et al. (2019), who reported that social media platforms have become a primary source of political information for many Filipinos, particularly younger generations (Osumo et al., 2025; Osumo & Letigio, 2025). Because these platforms allow politicians to communicate directly with their audiences, influencers often serve as intermediaries in shaping political narratives.

From the perspective of Political Socialization Theory, influencers can be understood as contemporary agents of social influence that shape political attitudes through digital interaction (Biswas, 2025). At the same time, Lifestyle Politics Theory (Giddens, 1991) helps explain why Gen Z may follow influencers whose values align with their personal beliefs. Political promotion through digital personalities becomes influential when it resonates with the audience's identity and values.

These responses suggest that while influencers contribute to political awareness, Gen Z voters remain cautious about potential bias and commercial motivations behind political endorsements.

Political Propaganda Dissemination

(This theme was supported by statements from two of the ten participants, IDI_P2 and P4, and should be read as an in-depth account from two participants rather than a pattern established across the full sample; see Limitations.)

The third theme, Political Propaganda Dissemination, reflects participants' awareness of how social media can be used as a tool for political persuasion and manipulation. Participants acknowledged that influencers and digital platforms possess significant persuasive power. One respondent explained that *"influencers have power to persuade many people"* (IDI_P2), highlighting the capacity of social media personalities to influence political opinions.

Despite this recognition, participants also emphasized the importance of staying critically aware when encountering political content. One respondent stated that *"being conscious helps avoid*

manipulation" (IDI_P2), indicating that awareness is essential in resisting propaganda. Participants also recognized that influencers may actively campaign for candidates online, as illustrated by the statement *"influencers campaign for candidates on TikTok"* (IDI_P4).

To counter these influences, participants emphasized the importance of conducting independent research. One respondent noted that *"researching credentials is necessary"* (IDI_P4), while another added that *"track records should be verified"* (IDI_P4). These responses suggest that Gen Z voters attempt to evaluate political candidates beyond social media narratives.

These findings are consistent with the study of Cadayday et al. (2024), which emphasized that social media has become a powerful tool for political mobilization and propaganda, often shaping public opinion through viral trends and digital campaigns. Similarly, Sugihartono (2024) observed that social media platforms can amplify political conflicts and misinformation, making it difficult to distinguish credible information from propaganda.

The findings also reinforce Cadayday et al.'s (2024) observation that the Philippines has become particularly vulnerable to organized online disinformation campaigns. However, participants' responses indicate that Gen Z voters are aware of these risks and attempt to mitigate them by verifying information and evaluating candidates' credentials.

From a theoretical perspective, this theme illustrates the interaction between Political Socialization Theory and Lifestyle Politics Theory. Political Socialization Theory explains how digital environments influence political attitudes through exposure to online discourse (Biswas, 2025). Meanwhile, Lifestyle Politics Theory suggests that individuals evaluate political information through the lens of values and ethical considerations (Giddens, 1991). In this context, Gen Z voters attempt to reconcile digital exposure with personal judgment, using fact-checking and independent research to make informed political decisions.

These patterns indicate that although social media can function as a channel for political propaganda, Gen Z voters attempt to counter this influence through critical awareness and information verification.

On the whole, these findings show that social media plays a complex role in shaping Generation Z voters' political decision-making. While digital platforms provide widespread access to political information, they also create environments in which misinformation, influencer endorsements, and propaganda can shape public opinion.

However, the results suggest that Gen Z voters are not passive recipients of online political messages. Instead, they demonstrate digital literacy, critical awareness, and active verification practices when engaging with political information. These behaviors reflect the combined influence of Political Socialization Theory, which explains how digital media

environments shape political awareness, and Lifestyle Politics Theory, which highlights how personal values guide the evaluation of political information.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Gen Z voters navigate social media as both an information resource and a contested political space, where they actively evaluate digital content to make more informed political decisions.

4.4 Contradictions and Negative Cases

Across the ten themes reported above, participant responses were largely convergent rather than divergent, with no strong disagreement recorded between participants within any single theme. One partial exception is visible within the Political Promotion Through Content theme, where the same participant (IDI_P5) expressed both that *"some influencers are trustworthy"* and that *"others promote politicians for money,"* indicating an internally held tension about influencer credibility rather than a fully resolved view. Beyond this, the researchers did not identify a participant whose account clearly contradicted the majority pattern within a theme. This apparent convergence should be interpreted cautiously: the purposive sampling criteria selected participants who could articulate clear evaluative standards, the sample was small ($n = 10$) and demographically similar (Gen Z college students within four neighboring municipalities), and the coding process, in the absence of a formally documented negative-case analysis, may have under-detected minority viewpoints. This limitation is discussed further in the Limitations section below.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE AND SDG ALIGNMENT

Based on the findings and conclusions contextualized to North Cotabato, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **For the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) in North Cotabato.** Implement localized awareness campaigns in municipalities such as Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan to educate young voters on how to identify misinformation on social media. Provide workshops that emphasize verifying candidate platforms and cross-checking information from multiple sources.
- **For Higher Education Institutions in North Cotabato.** Integrate civic education and digital literacy programs into the curriculum, focusing on local governance and municipal issues. Encourage students to discuss and analyze political developments affecting their municipalities, such as local infrastructure projects, education, and healthcare services.
- **For Social Media Influencers Active in North Cotabato.** Promote responsible online political engagement by verifying content before posting, citing credible sources, and including disclaimers about personal biases. Influencers can highlight

candidates' platforms and actions related to local community concerns to help young voters make informed decisions.

- **For Generation Z Students in North Cotabato.** Continue practicing critical evaluation of political information and candidates' records. Participate actively in local political discussions, share accurate information responsibly, and consider local community needs when making voting decisions, ensuring that their choices contribute positively to the democratic process in their municipalities.

These recommendations support Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), particularly Target 16.7 on responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making, by helping young voters evaluate candidates on accountability, competence, and verified information.

6. CONCLUSION

This study focused on the voting preferences and decision-making of Generation Z students in the municipalities of Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan. Using a qualitative research design, the study interviewed ten (10) college students through purposive sampling. The researchers conducted thematic analysis to identify patterns in participants' responses.

The findings revealed the following:

- Participants prioritize consistency in public service, empathy for people, accountability, and competence. These traits reflect expectations of authentic, responsible, and capable leaders.
- Voting decisions are shaped by alignment with personal values, educational understanding of political issues, candidate experience, and clarity of policy platforms. Local concerns, such as education, health, and community programs, strongly influenced participants' evaluations.
- Students use social media for political information but recognize its risks. They cross-check news, evaluate influencer credibility, and verify candidate track records to avoid misinformation and political manipulation.
- Overall, participants in North Cotabato approach political decision-making through value-based judgment, informed awareness, and critical engagement, taking into account the realities of their municipalities.

Based on the findings and the local context of North Cotabato municipalities, the study draws the following conclusions:

- Students from Kidapawan City, Matalam, Makilala, and Kabacan highlighted leadership qualities such as consistency, empathy, accountability, and competence. This suggests that young voters value leaders who respond to local needs and can

implement programs that benefit their communities.

- Participants consider whether candidates' platforms address issues affecting their municipalities, including education, healthcare, and livelihood programs. Personal value alignment with candidates also plays a key role in their decision-making process.
- While social media is a major source of political news, participants fact-check, cross-reference multiple sources, and review candidates' past actions. These practices reflect cautious engagement and critical thinking regarding digital political content.
- Interactions with peers, families, and academic discussions enhance students' understanding of political issues. These experiences encourage them to demand transparency, accountability, and responsiveness from political leaders, fostering informed participation in elections.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting this study's findings.

First, the study relied on a small, purposive sample of ten Generation Z college students aged 18 to 23 years, drawn from four municipalities in North Cotabato. The researchers recruited participants from seven higher education institutions: Central Mindanao Colleges, University of Southern Mindanao–Kidapawan City Campus, University of Southern Mindanao–Main Campus in Kabacan, Notre Dame of Kidapawan College, Kidapawan Doctor's College, Inc., Colegio de Kidapawan, and Makilala Institute of Science and Technology. Although including participants from multiple institutions and municipalities provided contextual diversity, the sample remains small and was not intended to be statistically representative. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as illustrative of how this particular group of Generation Z college students evaluates political candidates rather than as representative of Generation Z voters across North Cotabato, Mindanao, or the Philippines more broadly. Therefore, transferability to populations with substantially different educational, socioeconomic, institutional, or geographic contexts should be approached cautiously.

Second, participant representation across themes was uneven, particularly within the social-media-related themes. As reflected in the Results and Discussion, the Political Promotion Through Content theme was constructed entirely from statements provided by IDI_P5, while Encouraging Information Verification and Political Propaganda Dissemination were each supported by statements from only two participants. In addition, IDI_P1 and IDI_P3 were not represented in the leadership-quality or social-media theme sets. These variations do not invalidate the themes, as qualitative thematic analysis

does not require every theme to be expressed by every participant; however, themes supported by one or a small number of participants should be interpreted as more context-specific or illustrative accounts rather than as broadly shared patterns across the entire sample. Greater interpretive weight may reasonably be placed on themes supported by a wider range of participants.

Third, the study relied primarily on participants' self-reported values, preferences, experiences, and evaluative standards rather than on direct observation of actual voting behavior. Participants' descriptions of how they evaluate political candidates may not always correspond precisely with their actual electoral decisions or behavior. The findings therefore provide insight into participants' reported evaluative standards and perceptions, rather than establishing direct relationships between these standards and actual voting outcomes.

Fourth, the interviews were conducted primarily in Cebuano/Bisaya, with English used when participants preferred it. The researchers translated relevant Cebuano/Bisaya statements into English for presentation and analysis. To strengthen translation fidelity, the researchers conducted a bilingual verification and back-translation process in which they compared the English translations with the original-language statements. The researchers discussed and resolved discrepancies involving meaning, terminology, idiomatic expressions, and contextual nuances through consensus. Nevertheless, translation across languages may still involve subtle shifts in connotation, cultural meaning, or contextual nuance. Thus, although the authors systematically checked translation accuracy, some aspects of participants' original expressions may not be fully captured in the English renderings presented in the manuscript.

Fifth, the study employed a single-method qualitative design. While this approach was appropriate for exploring the meanings, experiences, and evaluative standards underlying participants' political judgments, it does not permit estimation of the prevalence of these standards among the broader Generation Z electorate. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as establishing the frequency or distribution of particular candidate-evaluation standards across the wider population. Future research may use a mixed-methods or quantitative design, including developing and administering a survey instrument based on the themes identified in this study, to examine the prevalence, relative importance, and potential relationships among these evaluative standards in larger, more diverse samples.

Finally, thematic analysis inherently involves researcher interpretation and, consequently, some analytic subjectivity. The student researchers conducted coding collaboratively under the supervision of the research adviser, addressing disagreements through consensus and constant comparison with the

original transcripts. The researchers also employed member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Member checking provided participants with an opportunity to clarify or validate the researchers' interpretations of their accounts, while peer debriefing enabled the research team and adviser to critically examine emerging codes, categories, and themes. An audit trail documented the progression from the original interview data through transcription, coding, categorization, thematic development, and interpretation. Despite these safeguards, the resulting thematic structure remains an interpretive representation of participants' accounts rather than an objective or independently verified classification system. The findings should therefore be understood within the interpretive framework and methodological boundaries of qualitative inquiry.

For Future Research. Future studies could extend this work by drawing on a larger and more demographically varied sample of Gen Z voters across North Cotabato and neighboring provinces; by comparing candidate-evaluation standards across regions with differing socio-political contexts; and by triangulating these qualitative findings with a quantitative survey instrument to assess how widely the standards identified here are shared across the broader Gen Z electorate.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION (CRediT)

Author	Contributions
Joy V. Lozano	Conceptualization, literature review, instrument development, data collection, interpretation, and manuscript drafting and revision.
Janry A. Aguana	Literature review, instrument development, participant coordination, data collection and organization, and manuscript drafting.
Jonamie S. Bugcal	Conceptualization, literature synthesis, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and critical manuscript revision.
Benjie M. Sicao	Research planning, literature review, data collection, organization and analysis, and manuscript drafting and refinement.
Christian B. Melaño John Rowuel M. Palabrica, DBM	Methodological analysis. Research supervision and manuscript revisions for contextual and disciplinary alignment.

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