



## SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

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### Abstract

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has significantly transformed patterns of political communication and civic engagement, particularly among youth. Young citizens increasingly rely on digital networks for political information, discussion, mobilization, and activism. While social media is often celebrated as a democratizing tool that amplifies youth voices, concerns persist regarding misinformation, polarization, and superficial engagement. This study investigates the relationship between social media use and youth political participation, examining the mediating roles of political efficacy and online political expression in fostering democratic engagement. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory and Civic Voluntarism Model, the study adopts a quantitative research design. Data were collected from 450 university students through a structured questionnaire. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling was applied using SmartPLS 4 to test measurement reliability, validity, and hypothesized structural relationships. Findings reveal that social media use significantly predicts online political expression and internal political efficacy. Political efficacy positively influences both online and offline political participation. Online political expression also serves as a significant predictor of offline political engagement. The model explains 64 percent of the variance in youth political participation, indicating substantial explanatory power. The study contributes to democratic engagement literature by providing empirical evidence on psychological and behavioral mechanisms linking digital activity to civic participation. The findings suggest that social media can strengthen democratic engagement when it enhances efficacy and meaningful expression rather than passive consumption. Policy implications highlight the need for digital literacy programs and responsible platform governance to maximize democratic benefits.

**Keywords:** Social Media Use, Youth Political Participation, Democratic Engagement, Political Efficacy, Online Political Expression

### Introduction

Democratic societies rely on active citizen participation to sustain legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness. Youth participation is particularly vital, as young citizens represent future political leadership and long-term democratic stability. However, traditional forms of political engagement such as voting, party membership, and public meetings have experienced declining participation rates among youth in many countries. Simultaneously, digital technologies have reshaped the political landscape by introducing new channels for communication and mobilization. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok enable instant information sharing, public deliberation, and collective action.



Social media has become a primary source of political information for younger generations. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms offer interactive and user generated content, fostering participatory communication rather than one way broadcasting. Youth can comment on political issues, share opinions, join online campaigns, and mobilize support through hashtags and viral content. This transformation raises important questions about the implications of social media use for democratic engagement.

Scholars present contrasting perspectives on the political consequences of social media. Optimistic views suggest that social media lowers participation barriers, enhances political awareness, and fosters civic engagement by providing accessible platforms for expression. Conversely, critics argue that digital participation may encourage slacktivism, misinformation, echo chambers, and polarization, potentially weakening democratic deliberation. The extent to which social media use translates into meaningful political participation remains contested.

Political participation encompasses a wide range of activities including voting, protesting, campaigning, online advocacy, and civic discussions. In digital contexts, online political expression may serve as a gateway to offline participation. Political efficacy, defined as the belief in one's ability to influence political processes, is another crucial determinant of participation. Youth who perceive themselves as politically competent are more likely to engage actively.

Despite growing literature, empirical studies integrating social media use, political efficacy, online expression, and political participation within a comprehensive structural model remain limited, particularly in developing democratic contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how social media use influences youth political participation through psychological and behavioral mechanisms. Using Smart-PLS structural modeling, the research provides empirical insights into how digital engagement shapes democratic processes among youth.

### **Literature Review**

Social media use refers to the frequency and intensity with which individuals engage with digital networking platforms for information, communication, and content sharing. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals actively select media to satisfy needs such as information seeking, social interaction, and entertainment (Katz et al., 1973). In political contexts, youth use social media to obtain news, discuss issues, and connect with likeminded individuals.

The Civic Voluntarism Model posits that political participation depends on resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Verba et al., 1995). Social media may function as a recruitment network by exposing youth to mobilization messages and peer influence. Studies indicate that online engagement positively predicts offline political action when accompanied by political interest and efficacy (Boulianne, 2015).

Political efficacy is divided into internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy reflects confidence in one's understanding and ability to participate in politics, whereas external efficacy relates to perceptions of governmental responsiveness. Research suggests that digital media exposure enhances internal political efficacy by increasing information access and discussion opportunities (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012). Higher efficacy levels are associated with greater civic involvement.



Online political expression includes posting opinions, sharing political content, commenting on issues, and participating in digital campaigns. It represents a participatory form of engagement distinct from passive consumption. Studies show that expressive behaviors foster civic identity and strengthen participatory norms (Theocharis and Quintelier, 2016). Moreover, online expression may mobilize offline participation through network diffusion.

Empirical findings generally support a positive association between social media use and youth political participation (Bode, 2016). However, some studies highlight the risks of misinformation and polarization (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Algorithmic filtering may reinforce ideological homogeneity, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Consequently, the democratic implications of social media are contingent upon how platforms are used.

Recent research emphasizes the mediating role of political efficacy in translating digital engagement into participation (Lee and Xenos, 2020). Similarly, online expression has been identified as a significant predictor of offline activism. Nevertheless, comprehensive structural modeling examining multiple mediators simultaneously remains scarce. This study integrates these constructs to provide a holistic understanding of digital democratic engagement.

### **Conceptual Model and Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework proposes the following relationships

- Social media Use positively influences Political Efficacy
- Social media Use positively influences Online Political Expression
- Political Efficacy positively influences Youth Political Participation
- Online Political Expression positively influences Youth Political Participation
- Political Efficacy positively influences Online Political Expression

The model is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory and Civic Voluntarism Model, suggesting that digital engagement satisfies informational and social needs, enhances efficacy, stimulates expression, and ultimately increases political participation.

### **Methodology**

A quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected from 450 university students aged 18 to 30 using a structured questionnaire. Established scales were adapted from prior studies and measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Social media use was measured through frequency and political content exposure items. Political efficacy was assessed using internal efficacy indicators. Online political expression was measured through posting and sharing behaviors. Youth political participation included both online and offline engagement activities.

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4. Reliability was assessed through Cronbach alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was examined through average variance extracted. Structural relationships were evaluated using path coefficients, t statistics, p values, and R square values through bootstrapping with 5000 resamples.

### **Analysis and Results**

#### **Table 1 Measurement Model Assessment**



Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social Media Use	0.87	0.91	0.65
Political Efficacy	0.89	0.92	0.70
Online Political Expression	0.90	0.93	0.72
Youth Political Participation	0.88	0.91	0.68

**Interpretation**

All constructs demonstrate satisfactory reliability with Cronbach alpha and composite reliability values above recommended thresholds. Average variance extracted values exceed 0.50, indicating convergent validity. The measurement model confirms internal consistency and adequacy for structural testing.

**Table 2 Structural Model Results**

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t Value	p Value	Result
SMU → Political Efficacy	0.49	9.87	0.000	Supported
SMU → Online Expression	0.55	11.34	0.000	Supported
Political Efficacy → Participation	0.36	7.45	0.000	Supported
Online Expression → Participation	0.44	8.92	0.000	Supported
Political Efficacy → Online Expression	0.40	8.01	0.000	Supported
R square Online Expression 0.58				
R square Participation 0.64				

**Interpretation**

Results indicate significant positive relationships among constructs. Social media use strongly predicts online political expression and political efficacy. Both mediators significantly influence youth political participation, demonstrating partial mediation. The model explains 64 percent of variance in participation, suggesting substantial predictive power. Findings support the argument that social media enhances democratic engagement when it strengthens efficacy and expressive behaviors.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the relationship between social media use and youth political participation. Findings reveal that social media contributes positively to democratic engagement by enhancing political efficacy and encouraging online political expression. Both psychological confidence and active expression significantly predict participation.

The results contribute to digital democracy literature by providing empirical validation of theoretical models. While social media holds potential for strengthening democratic processes, its impact depends on active and informed usage rather than passive consumption.

**Future Recommendations**

Future studies should conduct longitudinal research to assess causal dynamics over time. Cross national comparisons would provide insights into contextual variations. Policymakers should promote digital literacy programs to mitigate misinformation and foster constructive engagement. Platforms should encourage transparent algorithms and civic oriented content to support democratic participation.

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