Article

Unveiling Digital Democracy: Social Media's Catalyst Role in Enhancing Political Participation and Public Engagement

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Abstract: The increasing opportunities and levels of public participation are fundamental to democracy, and political participation is an integral part of the system. However, a comprehensive understanding of how social media impacts political participation is lacking. The objective of this study is to examine the role of social media in transforming public political participation by systematically observing the literature and analyzing the impact of digital transformation on citizens' political involvement through social media. This research uses a systematic literature review methodology to describe emerging trends in digital democracy studies and analyze them to increase comprehensiveness and comparability, in particular highlighting articles that cover various aspects of digital democracy, political participation, and the role of social media in the context of digital democracy. The analysis was carried out on fifteen articles published between 2018 and 2023. The research results found that social media plays a crucial role in building interactions and relationships between citizens, developing social networks, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and encouraging political involvement. Social media is used for various political activities, including advocacy, public consultation, monitoring, political campaigns, and sending direct messages to politicians and elected officials. The implications of this research suggest that social media is a powerful tool for increasing democratic engagement by enabling more accessible and widespread political participation.

Keywords: Digital democracy; political communication; social media; political participation; public engagement

Introduction

Transformations in the 21st century in human life are driven by advances in technology, information, and telecommunications (ICT), it led to widespread virtualization and digitalization in general, changing people's daily patterns, and different areas of people's lives across countries, economic, political, social, cultural, and religious (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020; Congge et al., 2023). Digital technology has great potential to change the paradigm of political participation and government administration. This includes utilizing digital technology to increase citizen engagement in political affairs, increase the accessibility and transparency of government, and increase the effectiveness of democratic institutions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Helbing et al., 2023), as well as higher levels of participation that can be achieved through digital means (Helbing et al., 2023). This shows that technology is not only a transformation tool but also the main driver in achieving democratization goals.

Scholars in the field of digital democracy are progressively directing their attention towards matters of inclusivity and justice (Nemer, 2016). Therefore, the dominance issues posed by platform power present particular challenges for digital democracy, directly confronting established constitutional principles and

mechanisms for balancing power (Berg & Hofmann, 2021; Celeste, 2019). It is critical to guarantee that digital technologies are used in an egalitarian, accessible, and equitable manner rather than exacerbating existing power inequities (Helbing et al., 2023). Citizens who practice democratic discourse and democracy must be critical and involved in digital democracy, it takes time, place, education, and opportunity for engagement for citizens to acquire and put democratic, digital, political, social, cultural, and other skills into practice (Fuchs, 2021). This encourages awareness of the importance of increasing digital and political literacy in society.

The majority of observers consider the internet, especially social media, to play a crucial role in amplifying political, economic, and cultural issues globally, as well as having an independent impact on politics (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). Citizen political participation is beneficial for the government and citizens, it allows citizens to exercise their rights, feel empowered, and gives the government a wider source of information for better decision-making (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). Social media engagement is frequently used as a metric for personalized representation since social media is regarded to be a catalyst for personalized politics (Pedersen, 2024). Social media has an important role in facilitating interaction with the public, allowing followers to engage in discussions and connect with other people through an online sphere. Social media offers new ways to engage in politics and often requires less time, effort, and financial resources than existing formal political participation activities (Ruess et al., 2023).

Several research studies have shown how digital democracy is spreading throughout the whole world. Saud & Margono (2021), illustrates the utilization of social media and the internet to engage in digital democracy in Indonesia, emphasizing the substantial participation of Indonesian youth in nationwide protests. The reasons behind their participation include issues such as corruption, shifts in democratic practices, and instances of perceived injustice. Comparative research by Vaccari & Valeriani (2018), shows that digital media helps in facilitating informal political conversations linked to increased levels of both institutional and extra-institutional engagement. Furthermore, compared to "third-wave" democracies like Greece, Poland, and Spain, social media participation seems to be more prominent in developed democracies like Denmark, France, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Evans (2019), shows that Internet use and democracy in Africa have a non-linear relationship, where Internet use increases when democracy weakens and democracy begins to increase when Internet use reaches a certain point. Africa is currently entering a new stage in which the internet will enhance democracy and digital politics.

This study was conducted because it recognizes the importance of understanding the evolution of information and communication technology, especially social media, which has transformed the political landscape in the way people are involved in politics and interact with the government. Engaging in politics is essential for a robust democracy. Social media has the power to sway public opinions, mold attitudes, and mobilize crowds. Hence, grasping the significance of social media in politics is crucial. This research aims to identify the role of social media in transforming public political participation by systematically observing the literature and analyzing the impact of digital transformation on citizens' political engagement through social media. To conclude, this research will explore the research question "What is the role of social media in shaping political participation and digital democracy? and how does social media usage affect individuals' political participation within the realm of digital democracy?".

Methodology

This research employs a systematic literature review methodology, aiming to illustrate emerging trends in digital democracy studies and analyze them to enhance their comprehensiveness and comparability (Congge et al., 2023). This research aims to identify the role of social media in transforming public political participation by systematically observing the literature and analyzing the impact of digital transformation on citizens' political engagement through social media. The procedural steps included in this approach include establishing research objectives, describing the methodological approach, and establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria. In this research, these criteria include several important aspects: first, the selected articles must be published within the last five years, namely from 2018 to 2023. This aims to ensure that the data and findings analyzed are current and relevant to the current digital context. Second, the article should focus on relevant topics such as "digital democracy," "political communication," "social media," "political

participation," and "public engagement". Third, only journal articles that have gone through a peer-review process are included to ensure high research quality and validity.

The search strategy used in this study involved several systematic steps to find relevant articles from various scientific databases. First, the databases selected for this search included Google Scholar, Science Direct, and Scopus, which are known to have extensive coverage of academic literature. Second, specific keywords such as "digital democracy," "political communication," "social media," "political participation," and "public engagement". Additionally, the search was limited to articles published within the last five years and only to peer-reviewed journal articles. The screening process involves an initial evaluation of articles found through a search to determine whether they meet eligibility criteria. Each article found in the initial search had its title and abstract checked to assess its relevance to the research topic. Articles that pass the first stage are then read in their entirety to ensure they meet the eligibility criteria. Articles that were irrelevant or did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded from further analysis. In this study, researchers used 15 articles that met the inclusion criteria. Data extraction is the process of collecting important information from included articles for further explanation. Extracted information includes title, author, year of publication, research objectives, methodology used, main findings, and conclusions. Standards are used to ensure that the data collected is consistent and systematic. Data from each article were recorded and organized to facilitate comparative analysis and synthesis.

Synthesis of results includes grouping findings from various articles grouped based on themes or main topics that are relevant to the research. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify general trends, differences, and relationships between studies. Comparison and Integration The findings are compared and integrated to provide a comprehensive picture of the role of social media as a catalyst in increasing political participation and public engagement in the context of digital democracy. The results of the analysis and synthesis are reported in a structured format, highlighting key findings, gaps in the literature, and implications for future research.

The Findings

The amount of research on digital democracy and participation has grown significantly in recent years, covering a wide range of subjects from value-sensitive design, and big data, to social media and communications technologies, while also emphasizing the customization of these endeavors to the specific requirements and contexts of individual countries, regions, or environments (Helbing et al., 2023). The use of digital technology to improve democracy must take into account contextual differences. There is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of digital democracy and participation.

Table 1. Summary of extracted data

Citation	Objectives	Study Design	Findings
(Congge et al., 2023)	Revealing concept trends in digital democracy studies.	Systematic literature review	Research on digital democracy finds that there has been a dynamic exploration of digital democracy, with a focus on its implications for democracy. It underscores the significance of politicians using social media platforms for political campaigns to enhance their image.
(Zhuravsk aya et al., 2020)	Review insights into the role of the Internet and social media in politics in recent years and consider the differences in the impact of Internet and social media features versus traditional media.	Systematic literature review	Studies indicate that despite widespread concerns about power manipulation, corruption, and authoritarian influence in traditional media, the Internet and free social media enhance transparency by broadly disseminating information and aiding the organization of public protest. In reality, younger generations, often considered experienced users, are less susceptible to the influence of fake news compared to older generations.
(Ruess et al., 2023)	Identify and analyze gaps between measurements and definitions of Online	Systematic literature review	Research indicates that while many studies incorporate measures that encompass passive behaviors like reading political news about politics, few definitions detail these passive activities. When it comes to measurements of online political participation,

	Political Participation (OPP) in scientific literature.		expressive activities are the most popular, but this concentration is rarely reflected in definitions.
(Theocharis et al., 2023)	Capture participating in politics on social media and assess how social media complements existing participation modes or inspires the development of new modes.	*Large-scale cross-sectional surveys*	Research finds that social media use encourages both traditional participation activities and completely new forms. Activities related to political protests and activities related to political parties that were previously grouped under independent modes are now combined under various modes of general participation. These findings were consistent in France, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This change may be related to the normalization of political protests and intense political polarization in some countries.
(Arshad & Khurram, 2020)	Investigating the relationship between the accuracy of information posted by government entities on social media and citizens' online political participation activities.	Quantitative survey with a single case study	Research finds that people's perceptions of government responsiveness, transparency, trust in institutions, and online political activity are all positively correlated with the information shared by government entities on social media. It illustrates the critical importance for governments to communicate openly, reliably, and responsively on social media to foster public participation.
(Stier et al., 2018)	This research examines election candidates who interact personally with the public regarding the main problems they face, and to find out how much influence this communication has on the features on Facebook and Twitter.	Bayesian semi-supervised nonparametric single-membership language model	Research reveals that on social media, politicians and their followers talk about subjects other than those that are popular with large audiences. Social media platforms have varied sociotechnical capacities that mediate campaign strategies and political communications in general. Politicians and their viewers tend to talk about events connected to their campaigns and certain social media themes instead of policy.
(Farkas & Bene, 2021)	Exploring patterns and effects of political figures' use of visual communication on Instagram and Facebook during Hungary's 2018 general election campaign, with an emphasis on the similarities and differences across platforms.	Visual content analysis	Research finds that using images to personalize communications is common. Instagram is a better place for the personalization dimension of privatization, whereas Facebook is more prevalent for the individualization dimension. Additionally, on Facebook, users preferred images centered on political candidates, but on Instagram, no similar effect was found for more informal visuals.
(Matthes, 2022)	Investigating the connection between young adults' use of social media and their engagement in political activities.	Comparing relative voter data at the aggregate level from the US, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan	The research found that, despite the exponential increase in social media use among the younger generation and the large number of studies conducted. There is a gap in political participation via social media between younger and older generation voters as shown by several countries in the US, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan. Despite the skyrocketing use of social media by younger generations, numerous studies have provided evidence that social media use drives offline political engagement.
(Marquart et al., 2020)	Investigating the consequences of interactions between politicians and young people on social media platforms on political participation.	Cross-sectional survey	The research found that political interest and peer discussion correlate with an increased likelihood of following politicians on social media, while posts from politicians and friends significantly influence campaign engagement among younger generations.
(Ida et al., 2020)	Knowing the role of social media in influencing politics has changed political	Cross-sectional survey	Research finds that social media use encourages youth to get involved in politics, which broadens their horizons, gives them more chances to engage, and strengthens their ability and

	behavior, political education, involvement in public affairs, and several other political activities in Pakistan and Indonesia.		knowledge for political efficacy. To raise public knowledge, the younger generation has actively participated in political debates on social media platforms, and this has influenced the political climate in both Pakistan and Indonesia.
(Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020)	Investigating the types of political activities through social media platforms that young people in Oyo State, Nigeria, use to participate in politics	Survey research design	Research finds that the younger generation often uses social media to participate in politics. Young people usually use social media for advocacy, public consultation, communication with politicians, monitoring and reporting election irregularities, and political campaigns, joining interest groups involved in lobbying, writing blogs about political issues, and corresponding with the public and relevant officials through letters.
(Matthes et al., 2023)	Investigating the impact of non-political, entertainment-oriented social media use on democratically relevant outcomes.	Two-wave online surveys	Research finds that live entertainment-oriented content decreases the likelihood that participation requires a lot of effort. This also mitigates the adverse effects of exposure to political social media on low levels of political involvement and interest. Thus, this study draws the conclusion often found in previous research that social media provides widespread benefits for democracy in general.
(Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023)	Investigating the correlation between the use of digital media and various political variables and their influence on the democratic process.	Systematic literature review	Research finds that digital media influences democracy both positively and negatively, making it a double-edged sword. It is a fact that digital media increases political engagement in democratic countries. However, the negative impact shows that the use of digital media is associated with the loss of "the glue that holds democracy together", meaning that trust in political institutions is eroded. Additionally, increases in polarization, hate, and populism are associated with digital media use.
(Yu & Oh, 2018)	Analyzes a varied sample of online American adults to determine if and how social expression and entertainment on these websites relate to political participation.	Online survey	The research found that there is no statistically significant direct correlation between expressive activities and political participation. Rather, the expressive use of Facebook for social and entertainment purposes only serves to indirectly promote political participation through political expression in online or offline political discussions. Through a more transforming process, nonpolitically oriented social media use can lead to political participation.
(Iranzo-Cabrera & Casero-Ripollés, 2023)	Analyze how political entrepreneurs, such as ´Ĭnigo Errej´on, a male Member of the Spanish Parliament, utilize the Twitch platform to promote experimental communication strategies, targeting audiences not directly interested in politics.	This case study involves the analysis of 18 live-stream	The research found that Twitch's three main contributions to digital political communications: first, self-monitoring, which allows elected officials to proactively engage with the public without third-party intervention; second, mediated authenticity, which allows politicians to build a genuine and relevant public persona; and third, connective democracy by attracting non-traditional political groups and answering their needs and questions.

Discussion

1. Democracy in the Digital Era

Technological and information advancements are reshaping political communication by shifting it into the digital domain, thereby amplifying society's role in advancing digital democracy. The double-edged sword that has both beneficial and detrimental impacts on the democratic process is called digital media (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). This dynamic is further underscored by research from Congge et al., (2023), who argue that the evolution of democratic structures within societies and governments parallels the rapid advancements

in information technology and the process of globalization. The positive aspect is the ability to facilitate people in voicing their aspirations, forming groups, protesting against government policies, and various other activities. Democratic countries are becoming more inclusive due to the existence of virtual spaces and internet access that citizens use to participate in democracy. Nonetheless, in this era of digital democracy, there is frequent concern regarding people's understanding of social media. Many incidents of ethical violations and abuse occur in the digital realm beyond the public's control. Both the government and society feel a significant impact from the dynamics of digital democracy. Nevertheless, the implementation of digital democracy has the potential to facilitate the achievement of a country's democratic goals.

Lorenz-Spreen et al., (2023), in their study also concluded on both the favorable and unfavorable consequences of social media on democracy. They point out that digital media expands citizens' platforms for engaging in politics, which in turn increases political engagement in democracies. However, they also draw attention to the fact that the use of digital media is linked to the breakdown of "the glue that holds democracy together," which is the public's trust in democratic institutions. Furthermore, they discovered that the usage of digital media was linked to an increase in unfavorable attitudes like hatred, populism, and polarization. This suggests that although social media can encourage political participation, its impact on democracy as a whole can vary and has the potential to impact political stability.

Knowing that individuals tend to interact with people who have political views or attitudes through cyberspace (the phenomenon of homophily) is not enough to conclude that there is less political segregation in cyberspace compared to interactions in the real world (offline) (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). In contrast, Iranzo-Cabrera & Casero-Ripollés, (2023) state that social media has a very important role in facilitating interactions and relationships between citizens, expanding social networks, and deepening interpersonal relationships, efforts to increase and strengthening connections such as these issues in the public domain have important significance in strengthening democracy and building strong political communities. Social media plays an influential part in the development of digital democracy (Congge et al., 2023), these platforms are accessed by the public to advance democracy.

2. Political Participation through Social Media

Over the past few decades, there have been significant improvements in the field of political participation research. Political participation is a continually evolving concept, and its classical, instrumental definition feels too limited in the context of the era of digital communication technology (Hosch-Dayican, 2014; Ruess et al., 2023). Based on research by Ruess et al., (2023), empirical data about online political behavior has a significant impact on the discussion of how to define political participation in the digital sphere. First, the fact that the populations involved in online and offline political behavior are different, it is argued that the younger generation is more dependent on online participation than offline participation. Second, different media platforms have different uses, thereby attracting different user bases that may exhibit particular sociodemographic patterns. Third, platform functionality facilitates different behaviors. Political behaviors that have no analog in the real world, like personalizing profile pictures or tagging friends in political messages, are becoming more common in cyberspace.

Social media is one of the most well-known Web 2.0 tools, and online participation will become a key metric because social media provides the best of both worlds by facilitating the sharing of views and opinions in the same way that traditional participation does, but with lower cost and greater accessibility (Tan, 2024). Theocharis et al., (2023) strengthen it by clarifying what happens on social media, which offers various affordances that enable various political actions. Certain actions, such as circulating petitions or contacting government representatives, can be quicker and simpler ways to complete required participation actions. However, there are other behaviors made possible by social media that were not possible in the pre-digital period. Examples include endorsing public politicians, leaving comments on other people's posts, spreading political news on social media with or without endorsements, and commenting on other people's postings.

The affordances of social media offer opportunities to carry out various political actions, which can be influenced by factors such as transparency, trust, and responsiveness this is in line with research conducted by Arshad & Khurram (2020), which shows that followers tend to assume that information providers who uphold transparency, provide open, current, and relevant information, the more followers will trust the provider.

Actively sharing quality information on social media also builds trust among followers. Public trust in the government develops as a result of the perception of openness created by the disclosure of institutional information to the public. This conclusion is important considering the global issue of public distrust of government institutions which has increased in recent years. The public's perception of government responsiveness refers to their confidence that the government will listen to their requests, grievances, and opinions if they voice them. Transparency, trust, and responsiveness are needed as key elements in strengthening online political participation. The media has been given the legal responsibility to improve the welfare of individuals and society through the unrestricted dissemination of information (Ani, 2024).

Several findings show that the media environment of many choices on social media contributes to the fragmentation of mass audiences (Stier et al., 2018). Social media use facilitates the growth of a user base of like-minded individuals, which aids in the achievement of a critical mass for social movements (Ida et al., 2020). Ida et al., (2020), found that Pakistani and Indonesian youth are eager to take part in the political transition, the majority (f 266, 66.5%) of the findings of this research indicate that the younger generation's participation in politics has changed political landscape, but 33.5% of respondents did not agree that the younger generation could influence politics in Indonesia and Pakistan. Thus, social media's contribution to increasing political awareness among the younger generation in Pakistan and Indonesia encourages political participation. Social media holds the capability to become a platform that mobilizes youth to participate significantly in nation-building (Salman et al., 2015).

In addition, Omotayo & Folorunso, (2020), demonstrated that young people utilize social media for a variety of political activities, including public consultations, political advocacy, political campaigns, monitoring and reporting electoral malpractice, joining interest group lobbying, writing letters to the public officials, and writing a blog about political issues. Looking at this, it can be said that many studies have shown how the younger generation uses social media, which facilitates their use for political engagement. Examining the consequences of social media use on political engagement, political interest, and political knowledge has become a central premise of political communication studies (Matthes et al., 2023).

3. Social Media is Reshaping Public Engagement

Social media is reshaping political interactions by allowing people to connect, disseminate information, and engage in discussions about politics, thereby increasing public engagement more directly and easily. In line with research by Matthes (2022), social media can foster new relationships between the younger generation and political actors, facilitating social interaction on political issues, connecting communities, equalizing engagement, increasing the expression of political opinion, and generally encouraging voter participation and fostering cohesion. Therefore, this research highlights the role of digital media in encouraging the democratic involvement of young people in politics.

Online and offline political participation is significantly driven by social media (Matthes, 2022), with a strong correlation observed between both forms of engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Non-politically oriented use of social media can encourage political participation through a more transformative process, rather than directly generating political activity (Yu & Oh, 2018). As shown in research by Yu & Oh, (2018), expressive activities that appear not to be politically oriented indirectly lead to political participation by facilitating political expression on offline political platforms and conversations. In other words, expressive activities that are not politically focused have political significance.

Marquart et al., (2020), show that the number of politicians a person interacts with on social media influences their political behavior, but the quality of the relationship with their followers may be just as important. Farkas & Bene, (2021), align with studies indicating that images are frequently employed to personalize communication within the visual strategies of political actors on social media. Given that politicians frequently employ self-portraits and other visual content that is popular with their followers on social media sites like Instagram and Facebook, the concept of personalization in visual tools is especially crucial. Personalization is a common feature in visual communication on social media, although there is a significant difference in the level of personalization between Instagram and Facebook, with Instagram tending to be more personalized. Therefore, personalization in the context of social media can influence the way individuals engage in politics.

Conclusion

This study discovered that social media serves as a platform for people to engage in communication with one another, exchange information, and engage in political contexts, this can improve democracy and increase involvement in digital politics. In strengthening democracy and creating political communities, it is important to improve and strengthen connections in the public sphere. Social media communication tools used by governments and public institutions play an important role in facilitating interactions and relationships between citizens, developing social networks, deepening interpersonal relationships, and encouraging political engagement, as research in democratic countries clearly shows. The affordability provided by social media makes political activity possible. Quality information on social media has an impact on public perception regarding the transparency of government institutions and increasing their trust in these government institutions. Social media serve as a platform for engaging in a variety of political activities, such as advocacy, political campaigns, public consultations, monitoring and reporting election malpractice, lobbying on behalf of interest groups, writing blogs on political topics, and writing direct messages to officials.

The use of digital media has been linked to growing polarization, hate, and populism. Conversely, social media can lead to ethical breaches and activities outside the public domain in digital media. Despite this, social media has the potential to increase participation and promote digital democracy. It is important to manage the challenges and risks associated with its use so that it can make a positive contribution to sustainable politics and democracy. The implications of this research suggest that social media is a powerful tool for increasing democratic engagement by enabling more accessible and widespread political participation, while also prompting critical reflection on how it contributes to increasing political participation and public engagement in the broader context of digital democracy. The limitation of this research is that it only focuses on one aspect of the role of social media, while other aspects are not discussed, and there are limitations to the data used in this research. It is hoped that future research will be able to dig deeper into trends and patterns of changes in political participation related to the evolution of social media in the future, which will enable changes in political and social conditions, to provide deeper and more comprehensive insight.

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