



NOTATION TRENDPLUS PUBLISHING
WHERE IDEAS MEET IMPACT

Volume-1, Issue 1, October 2026, Page No- 66-85
**Journal of Humanistic Studies and Social
Dynamics (JHSSD)**



**Social Media as a Catalyst for Democratic Participation: The Mediating
Roles of Civic Engagement, Political Awareness, and Digital Literacy
Among Young Adults**

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Article Received: 09-08-2026

Revised Version: 02-09-2026

Accepted: 23-09-2026

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Abstract: This paper examined the relationship between social media usage, civic engagement, and democratic participation among 968 young adults aged 18–30 years, using a cross-sectional quantitative design with stratified random sampling across 15 universities and urban communities. The primary motivation for this research was the growing influence of digital platforms on political behaviors in a demographic increasingly central to contemporary democratic processes. We collected primary data through structured questionnaires, constructed multiple indices including the Social Media Engagement Index and the Democratic Participation Index, and applied Pearson correlation, multiple linear regression, and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) for analysis. Our results demonstrated that social media engagement significantly predicted democratic participation ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$), and that civic engagement ($\beta = 0.43, p < 0.001$) and political awareness ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.001$) emerged as even stronger predictors. The overall model explained 70.5% of the variance in democratic participation. Furthermore, the SEM analysis confirmed satisfactory model fit (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.048), and we observed that highly active social media users exhibited approximately 24.7% higher civic engagement and 21.9% greater political awareness compared to less active peers. A strong positive correlation was also found between social media engagement and civic participation ($r = 0.77, p < 0.001$). Digital literacy played a significant moderating role ($\beta = 0.28, p = 0.002$). Therefore, this study contributes novel evidence that social media acts as a catalyst for democratic participation primarily through the mediating pathways of civic engagement and political awareness. The significance lies in highlighting the necessity of fostering digital literacy to counter misinformation and to promote informed, active citizenship among young adults.

Keywords: Social Media, Democratic Participation, Civic Engagement, Political Awareness, Digital Literacy

Introduction

It is digital technologies that play an important part in democratic processes and the study of politics and communication studies today. The overall nature, form and structure of the democratic process—including elections processes, the structure of government, community structure and the digital information landscape—have been transformed by the recent wave of information-communication technologies (ICTs). In the twenty first century, these technologies – particularly the social media platforms – have introduced new forms of citizens engagement in democratic process, raising questions regarding both amount and form of citizens' engagement in modern democracy (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). Although much of the initial scholarship on electronic democracy concerned itself with how citizens can use digital tools more effectively to engage in “citizen participation” such as online voting and e-governance (Friedland, 1996) (Bellamy, 2000), studies in the recent past have shifted the debate towards what social media mean for civic behaviors and especially for younger generations (Loader et al., 2014).

In the context of interest, young adults ages 18-30 are very important. Their socialisation has taken place in the world of digital media and in part differs from that of older generations (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). But social media is not only about their leisure pursuits, it's about receiving information, public discussions, and mobilizing people into collective action from them (Chen et al., 2016). Despite the widespread use of social media, there are some empirical results that indicate a positive trend and others that point in the opposite direction, however. On one hand, social media have the potential to engage the general public, particularly young people in social issues, including political matters, expanding their access to information and opportunities to act (Pang et al., 2022); on the other hand, it heightens the likelihood of getting distracted, becoming polarized and being subjected to disinformation (Matthes, 2022). This condition has spurred the demand for a strong quantitative study, one that attempts to disentangle the intertwined associations of social media use with democratic outcomes.

This study attempts to bridge this debate by examining the positive relationship between social media use and civic and democratic participation among young adults and understanding why and how. The main aim was to examine the direct link between social media use and the indices of electoral participation and community engagement as well as the three mediation variables: political awareness, civic engagement, and digital literacy. With this in mind, we surmised that there would be a relation between social media use and higher levels of democratic and civic involvement, which we expected, as would be an inter-locking between increased political awareness and an increased sense of civic responsibility. Finally we hypothesized that digital literacy might play a moderating role, as it might enhance the benefits of the use of social media and diminish the risk of exposure to misinformation. The outcomes of this study are significant for educational interventions, media policy and design of a digital platform to impart healthy democratic practices to the youth population because it provides empirical rationales about the same. There was strong evidence presented that is not just given by a few case studies in a small sample of purposely targeted sites, but is presented through a large, diverse sample in many contexts, including academic and urban settings.

In Section 2 of this paper, the literature relevant to both the usage of social media and civic engagement and democracy is examined as a basis for our hypotheses. In section 3, the methodology, such as sampling method, data collection instruments and data analysis method, are explained. The results of the statistical analysis (descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, regression models and structural equation models) are presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications of the results of this study in the context of the previous theory and research. Last, the paper concludes with a summary of the key contributions in Section 6 along with some pointers towards future research directions.

Literature Review

Over the past 10 years, there has been a rich body of research investigating the association between social media and engagement in the democratic process, in addition to the potential beneficial and harmful effects that social media could have on the lives of youth seeking to create the conditions for a participative democracy. In recent decades, social media has been an area of intense scholarly research in its relation to democratic involvement, which raises doubts as to its positive and negative aspects, while young citizens attempt to build a participative democracy. Early in the theory of participatory democracy, it was suggested that an engaged citizenry—citizens actively involved in democratic processes, well beyond voting—includes extended or prolonged interaction with the operations of their community, involvement in public discourse, and in collective decision-making processes (Pateman, 1975). These core issues are reflected in the digital world, so too is the effective use of platforms such as social media as another space for social interaction and social participation, alongside doubts as to how participation via the internet resembles real participation and whether it makes any kind of political difference at all. (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023)

Empirical studies have also yielded significant empirical evidence documenting a variety of positive links between social media and a number of facets of civic and political engagement. For example, online political interactions (sharing of news, commenting on public issues, and engaging in political advocacy group membership) and offline involvement (volunteering, voting) were found to be consistently correlated, with positive results observed when engaging in online political interactions (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). However, it appears social media has an even deeper connection with young adults as they are also the most integrated source of information about politics and actions (Pang et al., 2022). Additionally, young adults in different Asian societies have been compared with the relationships they foster with public actors (politicians, journalists, activists) through social media having been demonstrated as the drivers of increased political efficacy and political voice behaviours of young people (Chan et al., 2024). The overall findings suggest that the use of social media could have a positive effect on social involvement in the democratic process by providing more information and political opportunities to youths, and fostering them to be part of networks of civic involvement.

A relationship with democratic participation is, however, not necessarily advantageous—but that with social media. Digital participation might enable a "slacktivism" attitude, that could assume a "liking a post" instead of going offline or signing a petition to demonstrate that they've done an action, but without putting much effort in (Matthees, 2022). In addition, the algorithmic

editorial process on social media can lead to the creation of echo chambers or filter bubbles which further strengthen people's political biases and lessen their exposure to alternative opinions (Flaxman et al., 2016). Risk of misinformation/disinformation spreading through these platforms also has serious implications for informed democratic participation, especially by younger users with an absence of critical media literacy skills to critically engage the information produced online (Vosoughi et al., 2018). These balancing effects illustrate the need to study social media's impacts on the different facets of democracy to gain a better understanding of its mediation processes.

It comes to a point that Digital Literacy has become a significant factor in this regard to a great extent. Digital literacy is a competence to access, analyze, evaluate, reactively and proactively produce, with digital technologies, the information environment where the image is built, treated and shared (Martínez-Bravo et al., 2020). The studies have shown that youth with greater digital literacy can more easily tell if information is credible or not credible, have more productive online conversations about politics, and can translate in-the-online activities to in-the-offline ones (Kahne, et al., 2012). Additionally, digital literacy helps to neutralize the effect of misinformation by equipping people with the skills needed to think critically and analyze a text and check whether information is correct or if it is being manipulated and/or labeled as such (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). The use of these social media, however, does not alone comprise digital literacy; it is a tool that provides information about what people can do in digital spaces and what benefits they will gain by doing it, in the context of democratic action.

The level of political awareness—a sense of how the world works, what the government is doing, and about policy issues—is also an important intermediate feature that asks, perhaps more than any other, how people learn about current political issues. Previous studies have already found that the use of social media creates an association with heightened political knowledge, most of which has involved adolescents who are young, less likely to seek information via traditional news media, or both (Tucker et al., 2018). It seems there are two reasons, at least: unexpected encounter with political information via social media (even when not seeking information about politics) and opportunity to deliberate information-seeking via interaction with news organizations, politicians, or political interest groups (Kaiser et al., 2021). Engaging with political information in the media prior to a voting day has been mentioned as a predictor of a higher voter turnout, with those with greater information and/or political interest, more interest in voting (Reichert, 2016). The foundation for the present study was a theoretical basis that assumes a “pathway” goes from social media platform to political awareness to democratic participation.

The study has a number of important contributions that are different than those of the existing literature. While numerous studies have examined the relationship between social media usage and youth and civic involvement, and political awareness and voting behavior, them both in an integrated analyses framework, are examined using structural equation modeling. Furthermore, the moderation effects of digital literacy on youth democratic participation is directly examined, as it has not been examined consistently across large-scale quantitative empirical studies of youth democratic participation. The use of a wide range of model fit indices (CFI =

0.96, RMSEA = 0.048) and participants in this study (N = 968 young adults from different university and urban settings) shines light on a number of empirical results, yielding solid empirical insights regarding the positive cross-effects between social media engagement and democratic participation through civic engagement and political awareness. In summary, by investigating this question more deeply than the current literature does, we eliminate a major limitation and contribute to the literature by illuminating the process used to motivate—and in what conditions—young adults to engage in democratic involvement via social media.

Methodology

Research Design and Sampling Strategy

This study used a Cross sectional quantitative research design like other studies to investigate the relationship between R-Using social media, civic engagement and democratic participation of young adults. The study carried out in 15 Universities covering a total of 1000 subjects who were aged 18-30 years old were recruited. The selection of the participants was done on stratified random sampling which enable to balance the participant's sample when viewed by gender, education level and socioeconomic status. Within each stratum, the sampling involved random selection of a proportional number of participants from the total number of students or people, according to the estimates of enrollment or population—this random selection process was done within each stratum of the sampling: by institution type (public university, private university, community college, and urban community center). A stratified approach has been implemented in order to gain the maximum external validity of the results and to provide for sub-group comparisons specific for both housing and educational settings.

Data Collection Instruments and Measures

The primary data was gathered with the help of structured questionnaires which were filled online (using a secure survey platform) and offline (using paper questionnaires, administered in the University campuses and community centers). The instruments consisted of many variables under three areas of the questionnaire. Demographic factors included age (in years) and gender (Male, Female and Non-binary) and educational qualification (which was categorised as having an undergraduate or a postgraduate qualification). Several questions were used to assess the sociological dimension of the use of social media and gain students' perceptions of how much time they spend using social media on a daily basis (in terms of hours), how often they are using social media, and their preferred platform (social networking apps and video sharing apps and messaging apps and microblogging apps). We came up with multiple composite indexes to have the different configurations that were interesting. The Social Media Engagement Index values were generated by taking the average of each question's intensity of each everyday usage, their statement frequency, posting and commenting, responses to political posts, and participation in online social groups and multiplying the standardized score by each index component's weight based on the importance. The Civic Engagement Score was composed of voting on civic issues, membership in a community organization, public meetings, and community/volunteering. The Democratic Participation Index was made up of four indicators: Voting through the last national or local election; Talking about public issues; Contacting the elected people; Political participation in elections. The

Political Awareness Score included a factual knowledge set, dealing with the facts of current political events, the structure of government, and policy issues but also an item on subjective intensity (frequency of political news consumption). Each participant's perception of the ability to critique media, detect misinformation in online information, research online with digital instruments and safety online was assessed by the Digital Literacy Index.

Data Preprocessing and Quality Control

Data was obtained were going through systematic processes for data quality and statistical validity that were applied to the data as a whole. For the first, there were 32 cases that were incomplete, that is the question items on the questionnaire were incomplete by 20% or more. For the remaining cases, the missing values were filled with the median value of the variable being filled: Theory suggests this value is fairly robust for handling outliers and non-normal distributions that often occur with survey data. Mode imputation was used to deal with categorical missing values. Imputation leads to data-coding and data-validation on all the variables to make them consistent across all platforms. The Interquartile Range (IQR) method was used for outlier detection, considering values lower than $Q_1 - 1.5 \times IQR$, and higher than $Q_3 + 1.5 \times IQR$ as possible outliers and subjecting them for review. Any "excessive outliers" identified as data entry error were adjusted or removed from analyses, and any possible outliers were kept, but winsorized to the next non outlier value. Finally, to enable comparisons across different types of measurement, all the continuous variables were normed to the [0,1] range with the Min-Max normalization. Cronbach Alpha was used to measure within scales consistency of the composite indices: all indices were above a score of 0.70, which is considered as an acceptable level by many researchers.

Statistical Analysis Procedures

The method of statistical analysis was a multi-stage process, systematically testing the hypothesized relationships. Descriptive data were first collected to describe the sample based on the demographic data and data related to social media use and engagement. The Pearson correlation coefficient was then calculated between all the continuous variables to give an initial sense of direction and magnitude of the associations between them. For testing the major hypotheses for predicting democratic involvement, multiple linear regression was used with civic involvement index as the dependent variable and social media engagement index, civic engagement score, political awareness score, digital knowledge score and the demographic control variables (age, gender, and education) as independent variables. The unstandardized coefficients (B) with its significance level (p) and the overall model fit (R^2) in OLS regression was reported. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then used on AMOS software to further analyse the mediating pathways. Data was analyzed using the SEM method which comprised analysis results of the latent variables, namely social media engagement, civic engagement, political awareness, digital literacy, and democratic participation, as well as their components, which are the observed variables. Based on the contents of the literature, the hypothesized direct relationships between social media engagement and democratic participation/civic engagement and democratic participation, and indirect social mediation between social media engagement and civic engagement and civic engagement and political

awareness, with digital literacy being the mediator between social media engagement and political awareness, were developed. The indices analysed in order to investigate the model fit were the chi-square/df ratio, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable fit was defined as $\chi^2/df < 3.0$, CFI > 0.95, TLI > 0.90, and RMSEA < 0.06. Further, independent sample t-tests and chi-square tests were performed to analyze the differences between the social media highly engaged and lower engaged participants' democratic participation indicators in each sub-group. This analysis was utilized to provide an interpretation of the effect size that had been observed in the regression and SEM results. Descriptive and regression analysis was performed using SPSS 29 software, SEM analysis was performed using AMOS software and additional analysis and visualization was performed on R 4.3. The data analyzed was maintained within the spreadsheet software Microsoft Excel and preliminary calculations were done within this software. A summary of the abstraction for each indicator as revealed by the evaluation indicators used in analyzing the phenomenon in this research can be summarized as follows:

Table 1. Evaluation indicators used in the study

Indicator Name	Description	Measurement
Social Media Engagement Index	Composite score of social media usage intensity and interactive behaviors	Standardized weighted sum
Civic Engagement Score	Composite of community volunteering, campaign participation, and organizational involvement	Sum of standardized items
Democratic Participation Index	Composite of voting behavior, policy discussion, and electoral engagement	Sum of standardized items
Political Awareness Score	Factual knowledge and news consumption frequency	Average of knowledge and frequency items
Digital Literacy Index	Self-reported ability to evaluate and use digital information critically	Average of literacy items
Community Participation Level	Binary indicator of participation in community activities	Yes/No (1/0)
Electoral Participation Rate	Binary indicator of voting in most recent election	Yes/No (1/0)

Results

These findings seem to be empirical results of the data collected in 15 universities and urban communities, which are described in the next sections. After data pre-processing, he selected the final sample giving 968 valid responses with ages between 18-30 years. The results are represented in seven subsections; participant characteristics, descriptive statistics, regression

models, correlation analysis, structural equation modelling, and comparison of the most critical result according to the level of engagement.

Participant Characteristics

The data cleaning procedures described in the methodology part of the present study yielded the presence of 968 cases from a total of 1000 people who were approached; a 96.8 % response rate was observed. The distribution of participants by gender and level of education is shown in Table 2 (attached).

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of study participants ($N = 968$)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	52.1%
	Female	47.9%
Education Level	Undergraduate	63.7%
	Postgraduate	36.3%
Daily Social Media Usage	At least once daily	93.8%
	Less than daily	6.2%

The sample was stratified and had a balanced representation by the stratification categories. In Table 2, the gender distribution of the participants reflects that of the University and urban population from which they originate, thus revealing that the figure of males is closer to 52.1% and females to 47.9% showing a good balance. In regard to the qualification, majority (63.7%) participants were students studying in the college at Under-graduate level and the rest (36.3%) were students of post graduate level. This distribution is similar to that of typical age groups of young adults (age 18–30 years) who typically have a higher number of students enrolled in undergraduate programs compared to postgraduate programs because of the shorter duration of undergraduate studies. Overall the people were found to be very sociable as 93.8% of the sample members indicated that they use at least one of the social media platforms a day. This discovery is consistent with the explosion of social media use that has recently been revealed in both national studies in the study areas (AlAfnan, 2024). Finally, the 6.2% who indicated less than daily engagement were spread thinly across all subgroups, indicating a low minority proportion who use these types of apps less than once a day, possibly due to a variety of factors, such as individuals' choice, whether they have limited access, or they prefer to not post so as they have a digital minimalist approach (Newport, 2019). However, the age distribution of subjects revealed a mean age of 23.4 (SD=3.2) years and about 71% were in the age group of 19-25 years. This age range reflects an average representation of students sampled in the key concentration from the typical University environment. Approximately 15% of the sample were people from urban communities who were in the older age cohort (26-30 years) to encompass the entire age range of young adults in this study. It provides a solid foundation for examining social media involvement and association with democratic engagement in relation to different young adult trajectories such as recent high school graduates moving onto university, and older youth who are starting to work or further their education.

Social Media Usage

Analysis of platform preference and intensity of social media use revealed a wide spectrum of utilisations of the various social media services among this sample of young adults. Social networking applications (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) were the most commonly used platform with 89.6% of participants reporting their use. 84.3% of them used video-sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, TikTok), 81.5% used messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp, WeChat) and 46.8% used microblogging platforms (e.g. Twitter/X). Social networking and video-sharing platforms, such as in the national surveys that have been carried out about the digital media consumption of young people (AlAfnan, 2024), are prevalent. The mean amount of time spent on social media each day was 3.9 hours (SD = 1.6). They have a noteworthy degree of usage and deserve attention due to the amount of time that young adults spend using them, which may have implications for their exposure to political information and for their civic opportunities and engagement (Tucker et al., 2018). The usage hours distribution was nearly normal (62.4% of the participants used 2-5 hours a day of such involvement). Notably, 14.2% of respondents reported using social media fewer than 2 hours a day, meaning there are individuals who engage in these products' heavy user experience, and therefore are more vulnerable to social media mobilising and polarising influences as reflected in the research.

Civic and Democratic Participation

The attrition of these patterns of social media use will then be used as the foundation to further examine the extent young adults in the sample engage in a range of civic and democratic activities as measured by the composite indices outlined above and specific binary indicators as listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Participation rates in civic and democratic activities ($N = 968$)

Activity Indicator	Percentage
Participation in community activities	68.5%
Participation in online civic campaigns	74.9%
Engagement in political discussions on social media	71.6%
Voting in recent elections	78.2%
Following public policy issues	73.8%

Table 3 presents the average scores on each civic and democratic participation dimension in the sample, which were relatively high on each dimension. The main result, if participation were assessed in the last few elections, was for voting in recent elections; 78.2% reported that they participate in the last national and/or local election. The prevalence of this is also significantly higher than that found among young adults in many western democratic societies and is normally between 40% - 60% when looking at the age group 18-29 (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008). An explanation of this high rate of return may be the sampling design that sampled from the University setting, as electoral turnout has been consistently associated with higher education (Reichert, 2016). The second most frequent civic action among voters was to

run an online civic campaign, with 74.9% reporting that they had done so. This category contained some online petitions, donations to online causes, sharing social media related campaign content.

Sharing policy information was often through traditional news sources but also included using social media feeds and news-aggregator apps (e.g., Flipgrid), and reading posts from social media users “influential” in that field and advocacy organizations (Tucker et al. 2018). Furthermore, 71.6% said they were having political discussions on social media which were a significant place for political discussion among 18-to-34-year-olds. This is in line with the research that highlights the recent work regarding lower social costs of expressing resistant opinions in social media platforms where political dialogue is possible and diverse interlocutors in social media (Chen et al., 2016). Yet, whether those dialogues are constructive and a call to action is questionable—and there is concern that these dialogues can become uncivil and divisive (Matthews, 2022).

Table 4. Mean scores for composite engagement indices ($N = 968$)

Composite Index	Mean Score (SD)	Theoretical Range
Civic Engagement Score	0.62 (0.21)	0 – 1
Democratic Participation Index	0.71 (0.19)	0 – 1
Political Awareness Score	0.67 (0.18)	0 – 1
Digital Literacy Index	0.73 (0.15)	0 – 1

The mean civic engagement for participants was 0.62 ($SD=0.21$) which represents a moderate to high level of civic engagement (see Table 4). The mean value of the DP is significantly higher than the other binary measures of electoral engagement (0.71; $SD=0.19$). The general knowledge about politics among the participants (Mean score of the political awareness score: 0.67; $SD=0.18$) was at moderate level, but was high with large variety among the participants. The highest mean was for the Digital Literacy Index (0.73, $SD=0.15$); the participants appeared to be quite knowledgeable about how to critically analyze digital information, something that is critical to using social media for democratically beneficial purposes (Kahne et al., 2012).

Regression Analysis

The dependent variable was the Democratic Participation Index which was conducted from a multiple linear regression approach to ascertain the most influential factors in determining young adults' democratic engagement. The model's independent variables included three scores for civic engagement, political awareness, and social media engagement along with a digital literacy index, and two control variables—age and gender, as well as level of education. An ordinary least square model was estimated as regression model, and its results below presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Multiple regression analysis predicting democratic participation ($N = 968$)

Predictor Variable	Standardized β	p-value
Civic Engagement Score	0.43	< 0.001
Political Awareness Score	0.39	< 0.001
Social Media Engagement Index	0.35	< 0.001
Digital Literacy Index	0.28	0.002

In Table 5, which follows, the four variables listed below were statistically significant in the model. Civic Engagement was the most statistically significant positive relationship with democratic involvement ($\beta=0.43$, $p<.001$). This implies that for each standard deviation increase in civic engagement score than other characteristics, the docking should increase 0.43 standard deviations of the democratic participation index. This finding is in line with theories suggesting that the habits of engaging in civic behavior in both community and organizational settings develop the types of skills, connections and motivation that lead to increased rates of participation in broader democratic activities such as voting and electoral participation (Pateman, 1975). Political Awareness was the second most important predictor, $\beta=0.39$ ($p<0.001$). This indicates that there is a relation between more knowledge among the young of current political trends and governmental structures and of policy issues on one side, and substantial increases in democracy-related activity (voting and policy discussions) among the young on the other side. This linkage has been noted in previous research that showed that civic involvement hinges on levels of political knowledge, as they require an understanding of issues and options facing voters in the electoral process and a feeling of political obligation to vote (Reichert 2016). The other positive significant predictor for democratic participation was standardized coefficient $\beta=0.35$ ($p<0.001$) for social media engagement, standardized coefficient for which was positive. The findings support the main assumption of the research, namely that social media use and their engagement is related to young adults' attendance to democratic participation. Importantly, this effect was not mediated by participation in civic life and political awareness, suggesting that social media has an immediate and indirect effect on engagement in democracy. The immediate effects are largely due to social media's mobilizing potential and ability to instantaneously communicate information about electoral deadlines and locations, civic opportunities, and logistical barriers to participation (Pang et al., 2022). Digital Literacy had a standardized β value of 0.28, $p=0.002$, and was the fourth factor. All of the predictors had statistically significant results, although the effect of digital literacy was not discernibly larger than that of the other predictors, possibly due to the higher p-value, which means that there may be more variability among the sample in this effect. This is in line with the predictions of theory, namely that the more users are digitally literate, the more that is related to democratic outcomes (critical view of information, avoidance of misinformation, productive engagement with digital tools) (Kahne et al., 2012). The overall regression model turned out to be very explanatory, with adjusted R^2 value of 0.705. The civic involvement, political awareness, civic involvement on social media, and digital literacy account for 70.5% of the additional variance in youth adults scores on the measures of civic involvement and political awareness in this sample. There was little additional variance attributed by all the demographic control variables (age, gender and level of education; respectively); and none of

these variables was statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. This suggests that the behavior and psychological measures captured with the composite indexes are significantly more important for democratic engagement than are the demographic measures, and further underscores a need to emphasize understanding of how mechanisms lead to young adult engagement as citizens. We conducted a number of diagnostic checks because we wanted robustness of findings. The variance inflation factors (VIF) for all the predictors were observed to be between 1.24 and 2.87, which is lower than the conservative level of 5.0, indicating that the predictors are not strongly correlated. Visual inspection of the residuals for normality (via a Q-Q plot) and homoscedasticity (via a scatterplot of the standardized residuals regressed on predicted values) indicated that there were no serious deviations from the regression assumptions in the residuals. Furthermore, since there is the possibility of interaction effects, and to ensure that this is captured, an interaction term between social media use and digital literacy was added in the following model. The statistical significance of the interaction term ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.015$) indicated the preliminary evidence that the relationship between social media engagement and democratic participation can be moderated by the presence of the greater degree of digital literacy competencies; thus, the positive effect of social media engagement was amplified by higher digital literacy competencies.

Correlation Analysis

By means of a Pearson correlation, the bivariate association of the most important continuous variables of this study were investigated. Initial analysis of a correlation matrix supported the hypothesis of positive relationships between social media engagement, civic engagement, political awareness, digital literacy, and democratic involvement among young adults. There was a positive correlation between the Social Media Engagement Index and the Civic Engagement Score ($r = 0.77$, $p < 0.001$) as seen in Table 6. This discovery suggests that the more time young adults invest in social media use and the more they get involved in social media activities like posting, commenting and sharing content, the more they are inclined to participate in community activities, volunteer, and to engage in civic campaigns.

Table 6. Pearson correlation matrix among key study variables ($N = 968$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social Media Engagement Index	—				
2. Civic Engagement Score	0.77**	—			
3. Political Awareness Score	0.71**	0.68**	—		
4. Digital Literacy Index	0.65**	0.62**	0.59**	—	
5. Democratic Participation Index	0.73**	0.76**	0.74**	0.69**	—

Note: ** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed)

The scores of the DP, PAS and DPI were also positively correlated ($r = 0.74$ and $p < 0.001$, and $r = 0.69$ and $p < 0.001$, respectively). This suggests that the young who are expected to be more

knowledgeable about the goings-on and issues of today have higher rates of voting, participated in political debate, and engaged in electoral process than the young who are less knowledgeable. These findings align with previous research that shows how political knowledge relates to political engagement in democracy (Reichert, 2016). Moreover, there was a strong relationship between Digital Literacy Index and the Democratic Participation Index ($r=0.69$, $p<0.001$); the more people are able to critically engage with information on the web and use digital platforms, the higher their chances of performing democratic behaviours. The outcome highlights how crucial digital literacy is for a more vibrant democratic engagement in today's environment of misinformation and information overload (Kahne et al., 2012). In addition, the Social Media Engagement Index showed very positive correlation with the Political Awareness Score ($r=0.71$, $p<0.001$) as well as Digital Literacy Index ($r=0.65$, $p<0.001$). Most of these relationships were consistent with the theoretical underpinning of the study, namely the interconnection between engagement in social media and democratic participation of citizens as a result of this engagement, and its mediating effect of increasing citizen's political awareness and enhancing digital competences. It is also important to note that the Civic Engagement Score was positively correlated with the other scores on which this construct was measured: the other scores were the Political Awareness Score ($r=0.68$, $p<0.001$) and Digital Literacy Index ($r=0.62$, $p<0.001$).

Structural Equation Modeling

The method used in analyzing the relationship of social media with democratic participation was the method of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and software AMOS. In the context of the SEM, the direct and indirect linkages (path coefficients) between the latent indicators of social media engagement, civic engagement, political awareness, digital literacy, and democratic engagement were estimated, along with measurement error for each indicator. Using the structuring model, social media engagement were expected to have a direct impact on the construct of democratic participation, and a direct influence on civic involvement and political awareness as a mediating variable between social media engagement and democratic participation, while digital literacy was to have an indirect effect between social media engagement and civic involvement and political awareness as a moderating variable between the two constructs, social media engagement and democratic participation. Based on the general model fit statistics, the hypothesized model was proved to be good fit with the observed data. The ratio of the chi-square value/degree of freedom is accepted to be < 3.0 , there was a good fit as the chi-square value was 2.18, which was less than the accepted ratio, and the model was a complex one having a large sample size. Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was 0.96 and was greater than the recommended level of 0.95, which means that the proposed model is indeed a significant improvement over a lackluster null model. Similarly, the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) was set to be 0.95, above the general good curve fit of 0.90. Lastly, the RMSEA was 0.048, and the upper bound of the 90% confidence interval is 0.06 indicating good fit (very close to the maximal allowable value of 0.06), while the lower bound is 0.041. The fit statistics in the report show that the fitted structural model is, together with the strong conclusion, an appropriate representation of the underlying data patterns as given in Table 7.

Table 7. Structural equation model fit indices

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Acceptable Threshold
χ^2/df	2.18	< 3.0
CFI	0.96	> 0.95
TLI	0.95	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.048	< 0.06

The serene fit of the model measured by the value of RMSEA (0.048), conforms the standard for social sciences research as suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999) and is used as validation of the estimated paths of the structure in the model. All the hypothesized pathways were analyzed for structural coefficients which showed statistically that all the hypothesized pathways were significant. Higher with no mediation level of social media engagement were related to higher level of democratic participation, relating to the latent Social Media Engagement and the latent Democratic Participation with a standardized coefficient of 0.31 ($p < 0.001$). The standardized indirect effect was significant (0.18, $p < 0.001$), indicating that at least in part, the positive effects of social media on participation in democratic processes are driven by positive relationships between social media and civic involvement. Similarly, there was an indirect effect (standardized indirect effect) of 0.15 ($p < 0.01$) that suggests that the effect of social media on democratic engagement is mediated by knowledge of politics. On the other hand, the moderating effects on Digital Literacy was validated by introducing the interaction of predictor variables Social Media Engagement x Digital Literacy on the criterion variable Political Awareness as latent variable. The interaction effect was statistically significant of course ($\beta = 0.08$; $p = 0.018$), meaning that social media engagement has a larger positive association with political awareness among the young adults with greater digital literacy. The empirical results provide validation of both theoretical predictions that digital literacy enhances political information use online, including discussion, as well as digital literacy's eventual impact on the mobilizing power of SOM. (Kahne et al., 2012). The model produced an R^2 of 0.68 which equated to an adjusted R^2 of 0.686 for the model explaining variation in the latent variable of Democratic Participation which was similar to that of the model for the same latent variable in the previous regression (adjusted $R^2 = 0.705$). The marginally greater explained variance when using the SEM method is due to the fact that the method corrects for measurement error which may decrease the observed relationships. Importantly, the magnitude of the overall impact was nearly 35% of the total impact, suggesting that there is a strong impact of the social media interaction on the democratic behaviors of the young adults. Fit indices are relatively high and the most relevant structural paths of young adults' building democracy in their daily lives are direct mobilization, civic engagement, and political awareness that are linked to social media contacts and consequently to multiple and mutually connected pathways, which in turn might amplify the effects of contact with social media on the model conceived in this study. The fit indices are reasonably high and the most relevant structure paths are confirmed: direct mobilization, civic engagement, and political awareness as a result of social media contacts, and are multiple and mutually connected in order to strengthen the positive paths that connect social media contacts to the increase of democracy participation of young adults, as presented in the theoretical model formulated in this study.

Key Findings by Engagement Level

To get a more concrete example about the type of relationships that were significant in the regression and SEM analysis, participants were divided into the "high" and "low" social media engagement groups and the group differences were compared. Educates the reader about how much there is a distance in civic and democratic outcomes from the level of civic and democratic platform activities. The children categorized into two groups, one in the upper half of the Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) and the other in the lower half. The children were split into two groups, the first being in the top half of the Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) and the second in the bottom half. If a user scored above the median, they were classified as a highly active user (n=484) and if a user scored at or below the median they were classified as a less active user (n=484). These cut points were the same as previous research which used median-splits to define engagement levels in social media research (Saud et al., 2023). Overall, those who scored high on their civic engagement from social media had a score on the Civic Engagement Score 24.7% higher than those who scored low on their civic engagement from social media. There is great difference and therefore good relationship: between the intensive use of social media platforms and the discourses of community volunteering and civic mobilisation or local organisational work. The results are in line with theoretical approach predicting that social media reduces the expenses of civic discovery and recruitment to increase the participation of people who would be otherwise disinterested (Pang et al., 2022). When it came to political sense, the most active users were 21.9% more aware than others less active in their use of Internet. This improvement suggests that overall, the more often youth were oriented to political messages on their social media, the more knowledgeable they were about the political world (Tucker et al., 2018). The number of incidental internet exposures to political information but consumed during other types was as well as an exposure of information via followed sources during information seeking process. Thirdly, there was more engagement with community activities among highly active social media users (19.6%). This measure captured neighborhood involvement – in the neighborhood, neighborhood meetings, volunteering, and being part of a neighborhood group. The 19.6% difference points to the importance of social media to support the continuum of online to offline collective action, as a key part of the 'connective action' paradigm (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). In addition, highly active users (defined as those who voted in the latest elections) were more likely to participate in the elections (17.8%). While it is the smallest of the differences measured for civic engagement and political awareness, it is also a difference that is quite significant. It is also possible that a high level of electoral participation is an expected behaviour and that in these societies the participation of less active young adults is raised due to the expectations and norms of electoral participation. The largest difference was found for involvement in public policy discussion over the Internet with their involvement being 26.3% greater among highly active as compared to less involved users. This involved socially sharing policy stories, making political analysis and taking part in policy deliberation on social media. 26.3% means there are far more savvy social media users who are talking about something they perceive as important to a healthy deliberative democracy, political discussion. These patterns were statistically significant for all of these measures of comparison ($p < 0.001$) by independent sample t-test. The differences between high and low engagement groups are mostly ordered: The difference is

largest for directly online behaviours (policy discussions: 26.3%) and smallest for traditionally offline behaviours (voting: 17.8%). This shows that social media produce a mobilizing force in the entire spectrum of participation, but that they are strongest when it comes to activities which can be initiated and continued online. But there is also some spillover into "traditional" democratic forms with engagement in, for example, community engagement recorded at 19.6% and voting at 17.8%, which shows that there are also significant differences for this offline way of engagement. Part of these observed differences may be attributed to the mediators—the findings align with SEM results which also found significant pathways from social media engagement to civic engagement and civic engagement to political awareness, though not necessarily between civic and democratic engagement measurements. This may reflect the nature of the relationships discovered in either a correlational or a SEM as discovered in the subgroup analysis and thus means the relationships discovered in either a correlational or SEM are meaningful behaviourally within the practice or as relevant to the larger group. As this generation grows up exposed to social media, their civic involvement, political knowledge, community engagement and Electoral engagement, and policy discussion, has increased. The results also reinforces the central finding of the study that social media has the potential to facilitate the exercise of democratic citizenship amongst young adults, while at the same time addressing the key importance of digital literacy to achieve those positive effects, and minimise the potential negative effects (such as misinformation).

Discussion

This investigation's findings are substantive theoretically and practically important in the context of digital media and democratic life. But the mobilisation explanation that has been from previous studies is not the only one, civic engagement and political awareness are theoretical concepts that have been found to be useful as mediators between the use of social media and democratic involvement in society. Although social media has been discussed as a medium for direct political action (Pang et al., 2022), we found a more complex process in which social media platforms first shaped the political condition by creating a mindset for community involvement and a more political and informed awareness and engagement that is then manifested in voting and participatory behaviors. The results align with the connective action paradigm (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023), but with the added dimension of quantification of the mediation by each channel. While the return of social media on democracy is evident in its capacity to disperse political information, the level of explainable variance (70.5%) indicates that it has a greater power on democracy when understood through its capacity to localize young people in networks of civic opportunities – which was effectively demonstrated by a SEM with indirect pathway of civic engagement ($\beta = 0.18$). The implications, in practice, for policy makers and teachers will be that they would need to assume a wider stance of social engagement and social actions -- such as community services/volunteering, or focus groups and discussions on the most pressing issues of the day -- on social media platforms, and platforms for democratic purposes. Similarly, digital literacy ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$) highlights the possibility of the skills necessary to achieve critical evaluation of information (e.g., understanding that accurate and misleading/eu information have different sources, reasons for their existence, and authority; algorithms bias information; how to engage in constructive

online deliberation) to bring the democratic benefits of social media use upfront, and therefore mitigate some of the risks that social media participation has been shown to produce (e.g., polarization and disinformation, as seen in Flaxman et al., 2016). Digital citizenship could for example be integrated into the program of universities along with media literacy training, or become a module designed to educate people about what to consider when looking for civic action projects on social media platforms, and how to participate in them: attitude and methodology will support one another in digital citizenship. However, the results from this study have to be seen in light of some considerable methodological restrictions. The cross-sectional design limitation can prohibit the easy making of causal inferences on the direction of observed relationships with a large, although diverse, number of respondents (968) for this study. Drawing on SEM it is suggested that the use of social media can promote democratic participation, but the opposite might not be ruled out either by the use of social media, the desire to inform, connect can promote participation in democracy. Some of the subjects of the surveys (election and community attending, for instance) demanded self-report, meaning there was the possible influence of social desirability bias which might have overestimated the rate of electoral turnout (78.2%) relative to known rates for the same participation (typically 60-70%) derived from population markers (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008). Moreover, the authors relied on a sampling frame comprising university students, primarily, which means that the results of the study might not be applicable to other contexts of young adults, who also may use social media and engage in democracy in different ways. Similarly, assessing the relationship between platform use and political action based on one single measure fails to account for the fluid character of social media platforms, which can affect the relationship between platform engagement and politics, due to variables such as algorithm changes, content-moderation guidelines, and demographics of the users. This subjectivity in coding the “composite” indicators (such as the Democratic Participation Index, Social Media engagement Index) is also a weakness; else, there would be the possibility of getting several different outcome scores. Such restrictions naturally suggest some fruitful areas for further study. The results of this exploratory study, in its cross-sectional design, reinforce the need for ongoing longitudinal panel studies of the same cohort of young adults over repeated elections cycles and as they become more or less civically engaged. These designs would enable scholars to tease out the temporal precedence of social media use and democratic participation activities and shed more light on the causal inferences to be drawn. Further research should also consider the potential for an “echo chamber” which can also be analysed through propensity score matching or instrumental variable methods, and with regards to selection effects, as this could encourage those who are already interested in looking for a political outlet to use social media and formal avenues for participation. This research explored the patterns of citizens' engagement with social media broadly, and did not focus specifically on the impact of each social media platform — each social media platform has different affordances — it could be expected that each would impact civic engagement, political awareness, and political deliberation differently — ephemeral content on Snapchat, algorithmically curated videos on TikTok, text-based public discourse on Twitter/X. A comparative platform analysis could lead to targeted interventions to one digital space versus another regarding the possible different outcomes of democracy. Given the result of a digital literacy increasing the relationship

between social media and political awareness ($\beta=0.08$, $p=0.018$), further studies are needed to investigate which skills (lateral reading skills, algorithmic literacy, fact-checking skills) are most relevant and critical to informed democratic social media involvement. Randomized interventions of digital literacy courses combined with follow-up of observations of the intervention groups' social media presence and political participation would greatly support this. Furthermore, the contribution of unexplained variance to scores on the measures of democratic participation (somewhat around 30%) indicates that there are other determinants of performance that are significant, such as personality traits, peer influence, family political socialization, structural factors like registration procedures and voting places, etc. The psychological and the contextual issues should be taken into fuller models of youth participation, the idea is to create multi-level models including youth participation at both the individual and community level, therefore future study is needed. The contextualising patterns of social media use for negotiating democracy that emerged from the quantitative analyses above could be enriched by the analysis of the experiential aspects of such practices, which could be carried out in a qualitative fashion (specifically qualitatively thematic analysis), which would also provide valuable insight into the nuances of social media use for negotiating democracy (Chen et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study investigated whether social media engagement serves as a significant facilitator of democratic participation among young adults, and the underlying mechanisms through which this relationship operates. Our findings confirm that social media engagement is positively and significantly associated with democratic participation, but the more critical contribution lies in elucidating the mediating pathways that explain this connection. Civic engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of democratic participation ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by political awareness ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$), with social media engagement ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and digital literacy ($\beta = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$) also contributing substantially. These results extend current theoretical frameworks by demonstrating that social media's democratic value is not primarily a direct mobilizing force, but rather operates through the cultivation of broader civic orientations and informed political consciousness in young adults.

We also established that digital literacy moderates these positive effects, suggesting that the capacity to critically navigate online information environments amplifies the democratic potential of social media while presumably mitigating risks such as misinformation exposure. As the media landscape continues to evolve rapidly with the emergence of artificial intelligence-generated content and increasingly sophisticated algorithmic curation, the importance of digital literacy as a safeguard and amplifier of informed participation will only grow. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal directionality, investigate platform-specific affordances, and examine how structural factors—including socioeconomic status and political system characteristics—intersect with these digital engagement pathways. Ultimately, this work underscores the necessity for educational institutions and civil society to prioritize digital citizenship programs that equip young adults with both the skills and the civic motivation to harness social media as a constructive arena for democratic life.

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