ORIGINAL PAPER

Beyond "likes" and "shares" – exploring the complexities of social media and youth political engagement[1]

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Abstract:
The rise of social media has completely transformed how people participate in politics by giving them a forum for engagement and acting as a generational trigger. With an emphasis on the function of social media, this research attempts to investigate the dynamics of youth engagement in politics. The paper seeks to learn more about the potential problems social media generates in promoting inclusive and meaningful political participation among young people by looking into how it affects young citizen engagement. In order to provide a thorough analysis of the subject, the research design used a quantitative questionnaire to examine the dynamics of youth involvement in politics and the influence of social media on the engagement of young citizens.

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Introduction

Social media has completely transformed how people participate in politics. Globally, 5.17 billion people are social media users. This means over 63% of the global population is on social media. Romania was home to 13.30 million social media users in January 2024, equating to 67.4% of the total population (DataReportal, 2024).

Moreover, as of January 2024, there were 5.78 million Instagram users in Romania, 54.2% were women. Those aged 18 to 24 years old made up 32% of Romanian Instagram users, more than any other age group. The share of Instagram users in the country was 29.3% among those aged 25 to 34 years (Statista, 2024). In this context, this article explores the complex relationship between social media and youth political activity, specifically in Romania.

A recent study conducted by Pew Research (2023) in USA illustrated that one-third of social media users (36%) say they have used sites social media to post a picture to show their support for a cause, look up information about rallies or protests happening in their area (35%) or encourage others to take action on issues they regard as important (32%). A smaller share (18%) reports using a hashtag related to a political or social issue on social media during this time. In addition, SM has grown into a significant information and news source, with many individuals using social media sites to keep up with global events (Ahmed & Cho 2019).

The effects of social media on various facets of society have been thoroughly examined and discussed, with particular emphasis on how it affects political engagement, which has emerged as one of the most contentious issues. Scholars have reported that social media has increased political engagement and participation, especially among youth (Lee, 2020). Social media is claimed to lower obstacles to political engagement by encouraging the expression of opinions and conversations with like-minded people.

The intention of this article is justified by the large research gap in Romanian youth political engagement via social media. While various studies in the United States and other Western nations have examined how social media promotes political engagement, there is a notable shortage of similar studies in Romania. By focussing on Romanian youth, this paper seeks to fill a research gap and contribute to a more global understanding of social media's role in determining political behaviour. This study is not only topical, but also vital, informing policymakers, educators, and civil society organisations in Romania on the current state of youth political engagement and guiding future efforts to promote active citizenship in the digital era.

Literature review

Social media platforms are crucial for politically engaged young people to participate in activities, but they are hesitant to use them for political deliberation due to concerns about self-presentation and social context (Storsul, 2014). Gopal and Verma's (2017) comprehensive framework of political participation can be used to improve the research on youth political engagement on social media. The validated scale divides political engagement into four categories:

- conventional/traditional,
- unconventional/non-institutional,
- knowledge-seeking,

- influential participation.

In the context of social media, conventional engagement could entail leveraging platforms to organise traditional activities such as voting or party membership. Unconventional engagement could include digital forms of protest or activism exclusive to social media. Knowledge-seeking engagement may be especially important as young people increasingly rely on social media for political information and education. Finally, the influencing dimension examines how young people use social media to influence their peers' political beliefs and behaviours.

Studies have shown that there are numerous potentials and problems of social media in promoting inclusive and meaningful political participation among young people, especially among students (Bennett, 2008; Rheingold, 2008; Xenos, Vromen & Loader, 2014; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). Social networks have transformed the political scene by serving as platforms for information transmission, opinion formation, and collective action. Drawing on Gopal and Verma's (2017) multidimensional paradigm of political engagement, we can examine these opportunities utilising all four separate viewpoints.

In terms of traditional engagement, social media makes it easier to access information and organisational instruments, such as voting and party membership. These platforms allow for unusual kinds of digital activism and dissent, elevating marginalised voices and encouraging inclusivity (Olaniran & Williams, 2020). The knowledge-seeking feature is also important, as social media has become many young people's primary source of political information, providing multiple perspectives and promoting political literacy. Lastly, social media amplifies the influential component of involvement by allowing users to quickly share information and mobilise peers for collective action (Jost et al., 2018).

Moreover, social media platforms provide unique options for direct involvement with political officials, which has the potential to improve accountability and openness in governance. This is consistent with conventional and unconventional engagement forms, blurring the distinction between established and emergent political practices.

While social media has great potential for youth political engagement, it also presents a number of problems that can prevent effective participation. Regarding traditional and knowledge-seeking involvement, the proliferation of disinformation and fake news on social media platforms is a serious danger. As Tucker et al. (2018) point out, these events can contribute to political polarisation and misunderstanding among young people, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about traditional political activities such as voting. The ease with which incorrect information spreads jeopardises the knowledge-seeking aspect of involvement, thereby influencing young people's perception of political concerns.

The creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media platforms also impacts unconventional engagement. As Olaniran and Williams (2020) point out, these digital enclaves can entrench polarised beliefs, preventing constructive discourse and limiting exposure to other perspectives. This issue undermines the inclusive potential of unorthodox participation, potentially leading to more entrenched and divisive forms of political activity.

The influencing dimension of participation has its own set of issues. Ndlela (2020) identifies online abuse and cyberbullying as reasons why many young people avoid actively participating in political discussions on social media platforms. This

limits not only individual expression but also the possibility of peer-to-peer influence and group action.

Methodology

Using Gopal and Verma's (2017) comprehensive framework of political participation, this study aims to measure and understand how these types of interaction emerge among Romanian youth on social media platforms. The implementation of a validated scale adapted for social media contexts enables a detailed examination of both the potential and constraints posed by these platforms in developing meaningful and inclusive political involvement among young people in Romania.

It is important to emphasise the fact that we opted for a quantitative approach because, as a result of this study, we aimed to understand a number of general trends among young students in the region of Iasi regarding the most popular forms of political participation. Since Iasi is home to a sizable and diversified student population from all over the nation, it is imperative for our study to concentrate on this important student hub in Romania. By exploring this region, it is possible to identify broad patterns in young people's online political activity, which may hold significance for other student populations in comparable environments throughout Romania.

In order to understand how youth relate to forms of political participation, we proposed as a research instrument a survey with 25 specific questions, grouped into 4 categories. The 4 categories represent, in particular, the 4 forms of political participation identified by Gopal and Verma: *conventional political participation, unconventional political participation, political participation for the purpose of informing, and political participation for the purpose of persuading.*

In order to extend the study to the dimension of participation on social media, for each of the 4 categories we added a series of questions targeting the 4 forms of political participation with specific valences regarding the role of social media as a tool to facilitate each of the 4 types of participation.

Research Objectives:

In order to track how young people understand the phenomenon of conventional and unconventional political participation, it is important to set a series of research objectives. Thus, the three objectives we propose are:

Objective 1: To examine the extent and nature of youth participation in political discussions on social media platforms.

Objective 2: Understanding young people's preferences regarding conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation.

Objective 3: To examine whether young people relate to social media more as a tool for political information or for propagating personal political beliefs.

Research Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Non-conventional forms of political participation are more preferred by young people than conventional forms.

Hypothesis 2: Young people use social media to inform themselves about political content rather than trying to influence the ideological beliefs of others.

Hypothesis 3: Young people prefer the online forms of political participation to the offline ones.

Results

Although the quantitative data from 276 students needs to be further analysed, we have observed that the young participants in this study identify more with what Gopal and Verma in their study called *political participation for information purposes*.

As far as the results of the study are concerned, we will present them in response to the research hypotheses formulated above.

a. First of all, we were interested in understanding whether young students in Iasi identify more often with unconventional forms of participation than with conventional ones. In order to understand whether this hypothesis will be validated or disproved, we attach below a table with the questions covered by the 2 dimensions and the average scores obtained by each question (where 1 is the minimum score, respectively 5 is the maximum score).

Questions - conventional political participation	Average	Questions - unconventional political participation	Average
I work for a party/candidate during the electoral period.	1.95	I take part in political strikes.	2.04
I take part in political meetings.	1.51	I file petitions against decision-makers.	2.17
I follow online the meetings of the Local Council.	1.71	I refuse to pay taxes and fees to influence the agenda.	1.51
I am/was a member of a political party.[2]	1.82	I take part in boycotts to influence the agenda.	1.70
I vote at every election.	4.14	I share disapproving information on S-M about political activity.	1.75
I discuss politics with my friends and relatives.	3.39	I add critical comments on S-M regarding the political activity.	1.75
I actively participate in solving community problems.	2.67	I block users on S-M who have different political views than mine.	1.40
I follow the S-M pages of candidates and parties.	3.18		
I like the posts of candidates and parties.	2.82		

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[2] This was the only question with responses on a 1 to 2 scale, where 1 signifies Yes and 2 - No.

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Looking over the table above we can observe the questions that make up the first 2 dimensions of the research instrument, respectively the average score of the answers given by the respondents for each question. For conventional political participation, we can observe that the most common form of participation among young people is voting. It is easy to understand why, this being the purest form of political participation. The high score obtained for this question is also confirmed by the data regarding the presence of young people at the polls 2 months ago when the local and European parliamentary elections took place.

Regarding the results obtained for the first dimension, that of conventional political participation, we can notice another interesting detail: beyond the score obtained from the question regarding attendance at the polls and the one regarding the aspect of political socialisation with relatives, we can note that young people resonate with social media as a tool that facilitates this form of political participation. The last 2 questions that relate to forms of conventional participation facilitated by social networks obtained relatively high scores compared to the other items above. This aspect is not valid, however, for the second dimension, that of unconventional political participation: we observe here that the last 3 questions, those regarding forms of unconventional participation through social media, registered quite low scores in relation to 3 of the first 4 questions of the dimension.

Finally, in response to the first hypothesis formulated above, we can state that, after data analysis, it is denied. Young people from Iasi prefer, sooner, to participate politically in a conventional way than in an unconventional way. Thus, comparing the averages obtained by the scores of the 2 dimensions, we observe that the average of the answers to the questions of the dimension regarding conventional participation is 2.65, respectively for the second dimension we record an average of 1.76. Even if the scores are not great for any of the 2 dimensions, we observe a noticeable difference of almost 20% between the preference for conventional forms of participation to the detriment of non-conventional political participation.

b. Secondly, we were interested in understanding whether young people prefer to use social media to get information about political news and not to try to propagate their personal political beliefs in the networks they belong to. To develop this hypothesis, we will attach a table in the lines below.

Questions - 3rd dimension	Avg.	Questions - 4th dimension	Avg.
I use the media to learn news about politics.	2.97	I try to convince my friends and relatives about my ideological preferences.	2.11
I follow S-M pages of parties and politicians.	2.87	I try to convince my friends and relatives to vote.	4.00
I read political news from media trusts present on S-M.	3.32	I share political press articles on social networks.	1.97
I read political posts shared	3.29	I share on S-M the posts of	1.86

by friends on S-M.		candidates/parties I identify with.	
		I send political press articles to my friends via electronic messaging services.	2.51

Regarding the second hypothesis, looking at the data in the table above, we can conclude that it is confirmed. Young people from Iasi prefer to use social media to inform themselves about political news than to convince those around them to adopt a series of political beliefs and behaviours. Even if, as part of the last dimension, we find the question regarding the persuasion of relatives to go to vote, which registers an average score of 4.00, overall young people identify sooner with the informative dimension of social media when it comes to gathering political news. As an average score, the dimension of political participation for the purpose of information registered an average score of 3.11, while the dimension related to political participation for the purpose of persuasion registered a score of only 2.49, almost 15% lower.

c. Finally, the third hypothesis calls for the comparison of young people's preference for traditional political participation with that of political participation through social networks. To test this hypothesis, we calculated the average of the scores obtained by the indicators that reveal traditional participation with the average of those that attest to participation through social media. Therefore, for traditional political participation, we recorded an average score of 2.43, while for that through social networks the score obtained was 2.36. Even if the differences are small, we must say that hypothesis number 3 is denied, as traditional participation is still preferred to online participation. Of course, the relatively high score obtained by the indicators that reveal the political participation of young people through social networks leaves room for discussion. We will, however, develop the ideas we learn from researching this phenomenon in the next part of the paper.

Results emphasised the value of digital knowledge and appropriate online conduct.

Discussions

The findings of our study reflect a complex picture of youth political engagement in the digital age. Contrary to our first prediction, the questioned young people have a modest preference for traditional forms of political participation over unconventional ones. This study calls into question the widely held belief that young people are naturally drawn to more radical or disruptive types of political action (Loader, Vromen & Xeons, 2014; Pickard & Pickard, 2019). Instead, it implies a more complex understanding of young people's political behaviour, in which conventional forms of engagement coexist alongside emergent digital behaviours.

The high result for voting (4.14 out of 5) among traditional involvement techniques is especially noteworthy. This is consistent with recent research by Boulianne and Theocharis (2020), who discovered that social media use is favourably associated with electoral participation among young people. Furthermore, as suggested by Gopal and Verma's (2017) conventional participation category, this score indicates that youth are using social media to support traditional political activities. Our findings imply that

social media may reinforce, rather than replace, established forms of political engagement, similar to what Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) acknowledged.

Our second hypothesis, that young people use social media largely for political knowledge rather than persuasion, was supported by the data. This conclusion highlights the increased importance of social media as a news source for young people, as recognised by Vraga and Tully (2021). The higher average score for information-seeking behaviours (3.11) compared to persuasion attempts (2.49) suggests that young people consider social media as a useful medium for political education and awareness. However, the preference for consuming knowledge over active persuasion raises concerns about the level of engagement. According to Vromen et al. (2015), while social media makes it easier to share political information, it may not always lead to more substantial forms of political participation.

The research results did not support our third hypothesis, which predicted a preference for online over offline political participation. The close ratings between traditional (2.43) and social media-based (2.36) participation indicate a mix of online and offline political activity among young people. This finding is consistent with the "hybrid media system" notion described by Chadwick (2017), in which traditional and newer media logics interact, compete, and complement one another.

Our research raises questions regarding the scope and depth of political engagement, even as it emphasises the beneficial potential of social media in this regard. It appears that many young people continue to be passive users of political material on social media, as evidenced by the comparatively low ratings for more active online engagement activities like sharing political content (1.97) and participating in critical conversations (1.75). This trend of passive consumption is consistent with reservations expressed by Zuckerman (2014) over the "thin" character of a large portion of online civic activity. The ease with which content can be liked or shared could give the impression of engagement without really promoting a deeper commitment to or understanding of politics.

Overall, our research shows that when evaluating young people's political participation on social media, it is important to go beyond mere likes and shares indicators. Even though these behaviours might suggest curiosity, they don't always convert into more profound engagement or comprehension of politics.

Conclusions

Of course, there are a number of limitations of the research that we can identify and mention within the present approach.

First of all, a generalisation cannot be made for all young people in Romania, being a category of people with many different characteristics depending on their origin, interests, desires, etc.

Secondly, it must be taken into account that the research was carried out in an election year in which there is more effort on the part of political actors to promote themselves among young people.

Last but not least, the relatively small number of respondents prevents us from drawing valid conclusions for the entire studied category in Iasi and Romania.

However, we appreciate that the present research provides an interesting perspective on the degree of civic engagement of young people and shows that there is room for improvement that policy makers can make to develop public policies that encourage the participation of citizens and especially young people.

Developing methods that take advantage of social media's advantages while addressing the concerns and anxieties of younger users will be essential going forward. Enhancing digital literacy instruction, endorsing a range of trustworthy political information sources, and establishing avenues for meaningful online and offline civic engagement that encompasses each of the four categories of Gopal and Verma's approach are a few examples of how to do this. A more inclusive and dynamic democratic future can be achieved by comprehending and tackling the complex nature of social media and youth political involvement.

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Authors' Contributions
The authors contributed equally to this work.