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Social media and political engagement in Thailand: A qualitative analysis of political attitudes, motivation, and participation

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in shaping political attitudes, motivation, and participation in Thailand. As digital platforms have become more deeply integrated into political communication and public discourse, it is essential to study how individuals engage with political information online. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with 18 key informants from various occupational and social backgrounds, and applies inductive thematic analysis to uncover emerging patterns in the data. The findings indicate that social media has transformed from a platform mainly for entertainment into an essential medium for obtaining political information and keeping track of affairs. Most participants indicated that they used social media not only to consume political content but also to assess government performance and analyze socio-political conditions. The study identifies various forms of political participation. These range from cautious observation and self-censorship among groups that are sensitive to risk, to active information sharing and public knowledge dissemination among individuals who are more engaged. In addition, the findings suggest that political motivation is influenced by a mix of economic concerns, professional responsibilities, and civic values, especially those associated with social justice and democratic principles. Many participants demonstrated hybrid political participation, effectively connecting online engagement with offline civic action. This study enhances the understanding of Thai political behavior by defining social media as a type

of “political infrastructure” that facilitates everyday political engagement. It further advances understanding by emphasizing the layered nature of political motivation across social groups and the development of hybrid participation patterns in the digital era.

Keywords: social media, political attitudes, political motivation, political participation, Thailand

Background and Significance

Social media has emerged as an important sphere of political communication in modern societies. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok, have significantly changed the ways in which people receive political information, share their political opinions, and engage in political activities. Unlike other means of communication, social media allow people to engage with political information, disseminate information, and mobilize people politically. Therefore, these platforms are increasingly becoming important in shaping political attitudes, motivations, and engagement in democratic societies. Recent studies have shown that social media platforms enable rapid information dissemination and facilitate political discussion and mobilization (Theocharis et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2018). However, they may also contribute to polarization, misinformation, and the formation of ideological echo chambers (Valenzuela et al., 2019).

In the context of Thailand, recent political developments—including youth-led political movements, increasing digital activism, and the growing role of online platforms in public debate—have highlighted the significance of social media as a central arena for political expression and contestation. At the same time, regulatory frameworks and concerns over online surveillance and content control have shaped how individuals engage with political content in digital spaces. In Thailand, the rapid expansion of internet access and smartphone usage has enabled individuals from diverse social backgrounds to participate in political discussions and monitor government activities in real time. However, the ways in which individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to political information on social media remain underexplored, particularly from a qualitative perspective. While existing studies have largely relied on quantitative approaches to measure political attitudes and participation, such methods may not fully capture the underlying meanings, lived experiences, and contextual factors that shape individuals’ engagement with political content. A qualitative approach is therefore necessary to provide deeper insights into how individuals construct political understanding, motivation, and participation through everyday interactions with social media.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the role of social media engagement in shaping political attitudes, political motivation, and political participation in Thailand through a qualitative lens. By using in-depth interviews with individuals from diverse social and occupational backgrounds, this study offers a deeper understanding of social media as not only a medium of political communication but also as a form of political infrastructure influencing civic awareness and engagement. This study is guided by

the following research questions: 1) How does social media engagement shape political attitudes among individuals in Thailand? 2) In what ways does social media influence political motivation? and 3) How does social media facilitate different forms of political participation in the Thai context?

Literature Review

Social media has over the years, become an integral aspect of the politics of communication in the modern world, impacting the ways in which people receive information, build political opinions, and participate in the civic process. Several theories have been put forward to account for the ways in which people are affected by technology in the process of politics. These theories focus on the interplay of technology, the mind, and society in the politics of communication.

Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement refers to how individuals interact with digital media. This includes sharing information, discussing politics, and participating in online discussions. However, engagement also includes an individual's psychological engagement with digital content. Past research indicates that digital media has contributed significantly to the dissemination of political information and has allowed individuals to participate more actively in politics than traditional media environments (Weeks et al., 2015). Several theories have been proposed to explain why individuals engage more with digital media than traditional media. The Theory of Reasoned Action suggests that individuals' engagement with digital media is affected by their attitudes and perceived social norms (Rauniar et al., 2019). The theory of uses and gratifications suggests that individuals' engagement with digital media is affected by their individual needs, including information-seeking, personal identity, and social interaction (Rathnayake & Winter, 2021). The social capital theory suggests that individuals' engagement with digital media is affected by their networks (Kim et al., 2020). The theory of affordance suggests that individuals' engagement with digital media is affected by their ability to interact and mobilize (Zeng et al., 2019). From these theories, it is clear that individuals' engagement with social media is a multidimensional concept affected by individual, social, and technological factors.

Political Attitudes

Political attitudes are defined as individuals' evaluative orientations toward political institutions, policies, actors, and ideologies, influenced by various psychological, social, and environmental factors such as values, political socialization, exposure to the media, and socio-economic conditions (Sindermann et al., 2021). The importance of political attitudes in shaping individuals' behavior cannot be overstated, as they significantly contribute to shaping individuals' perceptions of politics, governance, democracy, and policies. The development of political attitudes has been extensively studied through various theoretical lenses. Political psychology has emphasized various aspects such as emotions, personality, and group affiliation in shaping individuals' political attitudes (Schreiber, 2018), suggesting that individuals tend to perceive political information through the lens of their ideology, which reinforces their pre-existing

attitudes (Figgou & Chrysoschoou, 2019). On the other hand, theories such as agenda-setting, framing, and priming in the context of media studies highlight various ways in which exposure to mediated information affects individuals' perceptions of politics (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). In terms of digital media, it is suggested that exposure to political information through various sources increases individuals' exposure to diverse views but also increases the risk of echo chambers. Overall, all these theoretical lenses on political attitudes highlight that individuals' political attitudes are constructed through a dynamic interaction between individuals' cognitive processes and exposure to mediated information environments. However, prior research has highlighted a gap between political attitudes and actual participation, often referred to as the attitude-behavior gap. Individuals may hold strong political views but refrain from expressing them publicly due to perceived social, professional, or political risks. This is particularly relevant in digital environments, where concerns about surveillance, social judgment, or institutional consequences may lead to self-censorship despite high levels of political awareness.

Political Motivation

Political motivation is a term that refers to the psychological factors that influence an individual's interaction with political information and their political activities. Political motivation is usually influenced by factors such as an individual's political ideology, interests, social identities, and political efficacies. Motivated Reasoning Theory argues that an individual's interaction with political information is usually guided by their motivations and is based on their existing political ideology and social identities (Bolsen & Palm, 2019). In other words, political motivation is usually influenced by cognitive bias. However, political motivation can be viewed differently using Self-Determination Theory. Self-Determination Theory argues that political motivation is usually based on factors such as an individual's intrinsic political motivations, such as their political ideology and civic responsibility, and their extrinsic motivations, such as social pressures and rewards (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). In addition, political communication theory argues that social networks and online environments are usually important in stimulating political interest and political motivation. Political communication theory argues that social media usually increases an individual's political motivation (Jost et al., 2018). Therefore, political motivation is usually based on the interaction between an individual's psychological factors and their interaction with political information.

Political Participation

Political participation involves voluntary actions undertaken by an individual to exert some level of influence over political decision-making processes and governance in the country. The traditional form of political participation involves voting, party participation, attending public meetings, and protesting (Fayomi & Adebayo, 2018), all of which are important avenues for democratic expression and accountability. However, with the advent of digital technologies, political participation has expanded to involve other forms of participation, such as the sharing of political information, engaging in discussions, and campaigning, all of which take place through digital media (Theocharis et al., 2022). These two forms of participation are said to blend together to form hybrid participation, as digital participation combines

with offline participation to form a unique form of civic participation. This form of participation involves the integration of communication with offline participation. In spite of all these opportunities, however, some authors argue that digital media pose some challenges to civic participation (Valenzuela et al., 2019), although social media can still act as a facilitator of political awareness and participation. This indicates that modern political participation involves a unique form of participation.

In this study, social media is conceptualized as a form of “political infrastructure,” referring to the underlying digital environment that structures how individuals access information, communicate, and participate in political processes in everyday life. Rather than being merely communication tools, social media platforms function as embedded systems that mediate political awareness, shape discourse, and enable both online and offline forms of participation. While these theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights, this study integrates them into a cohesive framework to explain political engagement in the digital context. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why individuals actively seek political content based on their needs, while Social Capital Theory highlights the role of networks in shaping exposure and interaction. Affordance Theory further explains how platform features enable or constrain different forms of participation. These perspectives are complemented by Motivated Reasoning Theory, which explains how individuals interpret political information in ways that reinforce their existing beliefs. Together, these theories illustrate that political engagement on social media emerges from the interaction between individual motivations, social networks, and platform structures.

Research Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework outlines the relationships among social media engagement, political attitudes, political motivation, and political participation. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, illustrating the relationships between social media engagement, political attitudes, political motivation, and political participation. The model also incorporates a feedback loop, where political participation reinforces subsequent engagement with social media. In addition, key dimensions identified from the qualitative findings—such as economic survival, professional responsibility, civic values, and varying forms of participation (passive and active)—are integrated to reflect the empirical complexity of the phenomenon.

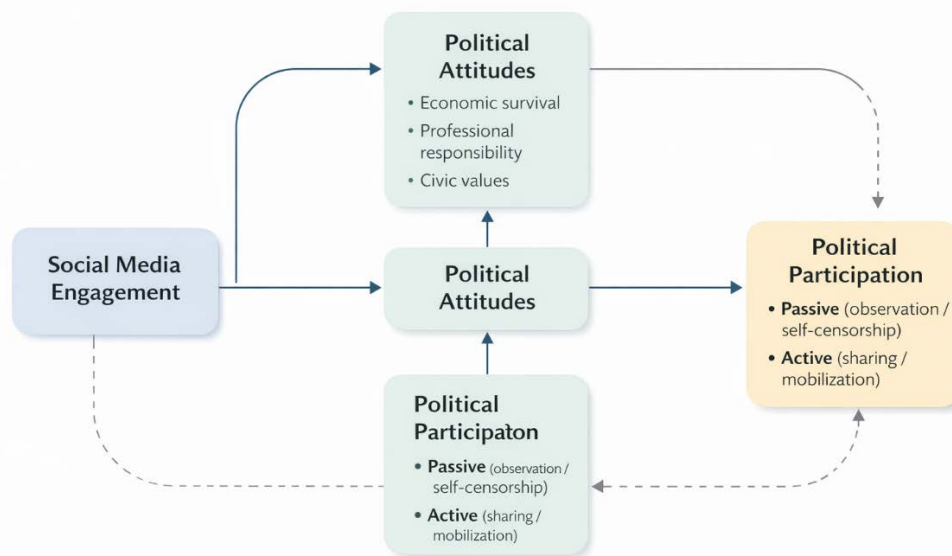


Figure 1 Illustrates the conceptual relationships among the key variables

Medthods

This study utilized a qualitative research design in exploring the influence of social media engagement on political attitudes, political motivation, and political participation in Thailand. The qualitative research design was appropriate in this study as it allows an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of individuals about their political engagement in the digital environment. Unlike the quantitative research design, the qualitative design offers a deeper understanding of the meanings of political engagement.

The research design used in the research was exploratory in nature, and it used a qualitative method of data collection, specifically in-depth interviews with key informants. This helped the researcher gather in-depth information regarding individuals' usage of social media, their perception of political information, and their participation in politics. It also helped in identifying patterns and themes regarding individuals' political attitude, motivation, and participation, as observed in various social and occupational groups.

1. Population and sample

The study was conducted with the help of 18 key informants from different walks of life to obtain comprehensive insights regarding the concept of social media and political engagement. The key informants included students, professionals, government officials, private sector employees, entrepreneurs, labor workers, and civil society activists from different walks of life to obtain comprehensive insights regarding the concept of social media and political engagement. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling technique to conduct the study, which is one of the widely used techniques in qualitative research to identify individuals with experiences and knowledge related to the study or research topic. The inclusion

criteria for the key informants were based on the participants' usage of social media and political information or discussions on digital platforms.

2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' experiences with social media use, political attitudes, political motivation, and political participation. This approach allowed participants to share their perspectives openly while maintaining a clear focus on the key research themes. The interview protocol covered topics such as patterns of social media use, engagement with political content, political attitudes, motivations for political involvement, and forms of political participation. Interviews were conducted individually to ensure that participants could express their views freely. Each session also explored participants' experiences with commonly used platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube, as well as other digital media used for accessing political information and engaging in public discourse.

3. Data analysis

The data collected through the interviews was analyzed through the method of thematic analysis, which is used for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns in data collected through qualitative research methods. The method of data analysis started with the coding of the data collected through the interviews, followed by the development of broader themes through the organization of related concepts, through which various prominent themes were developed, such as social media usage, various aspects of political engagement in social media, changes in political attitude, motivational factors for engaging in politics, and various aspects of political participation in both social media and real-life scenarios. This method of data analysis helped the researcher synthesize various ideas and interpret the role of social media as a tool for developing political awareness, motivation, and participation in Thai society. The data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data without imposing predefined theoretical categories. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, the researcher employed iterative coding, cross-checking of themes, and careful interpretation of participants' narratives.

Results

Table 1 demographic characteristics of key informants

No.	Occupation / Role
1	Political journalist (12 years of experience)
2	High school student (Science-Math program)
3	High school student (Language program)
4	Undergraduate student in Political Science (public university)
5	Master's student in Political Sociology
6	Private sector employee (Bangkok)
7	Online seller
8	Delivery driver
9	Freelance technician
10	Business owner
11	Political activist (online movement group)
12	Civil society activist (protest participant)
13	Independent activist (online campaign initiator)
14	Government officer (Ministry of Public Health)
15	State enterprise employee (Electricity Authority)
16	Local administrative officer
17	Human rights lawyer
18	Internal medicine physician (public hospital)

Qualitative content analysis of the in-depth interviews with the 18 key informants identified some important themes regarding the role of social media in the formation of political engagement in Thailand. The respondents, coming from diverse occupational backgrounds, including students, professional people, government officials, entrepreneurs, and labor workers, shared some valuable insights regarding the role of social media in the formation of their political awareness, attitudes, motivation, and participation. Thematic content analysis identified five major themes: 1) social media as an information infrastructure, 2) patterns of political engagement, 3) transformation of political attitudes, 4) layers of political motivation, and 5) hybrid forms of political participation.

1. Social Media as Information Infrastructure: One of the most prominent findings that emerged from the interviews is that social media has transitioned from an entertainment tool to an essential part of the broader infrastructure of information access and daily life. All participants spoke of digital platforms as essential tools in monitoring political developments, accessing information, and understanding public sentiment. For example, one participant spoke of the importance of Twitter (X) in modern-day information environments:

If you are not on X, it is as if you have disappeared from the news field.

(Key Informant 1)

The statement is significant in that it speaks of social media's integration with professional life, especially in professions that require access to real-time information. Similar patterns were observed with regard to legal and healthcare professionals, who spoke of social media as an essential tool in staying updated on emerging political and policy-related developments. As one participant observed:

Information about arrests often appears on Twitter before any official documentation is released.

(Key Informant 17)

Thus, the overall findings suggest that social media is not merely a tool of communication but is embedded in the broader sphere of information access. This finding supports the concept of “political infrastructure,” where digital platforms function as foundational systems through which individuals access, interpret, and respond to political information in everyday life. It also reflects the logic of affordance theory, as social media platforms enable real-time information flows and reduce dependency on traditional institutional sources. However, while most participants emphasized the centrality of social media in accessing political information, some participants—particularly those in risk-sensitive or less digitally engaged groups—demonstrated a more passive reliance on these platforms, using them primarily for observation rather than active information seeking. This shift in informational authority appears to be driven by both platform characteristics, such as speed and accessibility, and user practices, including continuous monitoring and reliance on peer-shared content, which together reshape how political knowledge is produced and circulated in the Thai context.

2. Patterns of Political Engagement: The interviews also identified various patterns of engaging with the content of politics on social media, depending on the differences in occupational risks, interests, and the perceived implications of engaging in public expressions of politics. Some of the respondents adopted a cautious approach, especially those in organizations where the expression of politics in public would affect their employment status. These respondents adopted the culture of self-censorship, in that they preferred to be observers rather than participants in the discussion of politics on social media. As one respondent noted:

I prefer to just read and not comment because I don't want it to affect my work.

(Key Informant 9)

This shows that some people, especially those in risk-sensitive positions, prefer to remain low-key in public, but they also engage in the content of politics in some private ways. However, some respondents adopted an active approach in the communication of politics, especially those in professional

fields such as academics, journalists, and lawyers, as they adopted the approach of public education through the use of social media. As the respondent noted:

I try to explain complex issues so that people can understand what is really happening.

(Key Informant 17)

This shows that some people use social media as an avenue for the dissemination of knowledge, in that they actively participate in the communication of politics to the public, especially those with the relevant knowledge in the field. There was also the third pattern of engaging with the content of politics, especially among those respondents whose livelihood was affected by the government. These respondents adopted an active approach in engaging with political content, as they responded actively to the politics that affected their livelihood directly. As the respondent noted:

When policies affect my income, I feel like I have to speak out or at least share information.

(Key Informant 7)

This shows that the motivation for engaging in politics comes from the personal interests that people may have, in that they actively participate in the communication of politics when they feel that politics affects their livelihood directly. This shows that the motivation for engaging with political content comes from the personal interests that people may have, in that they actively participate in the communication of politics when they feel that politics affects their livelihood directly. These patterns of engagement reflect the interaction between individual motivations, perceived risks, and platform affordances in shaping political behavior. The cautious behavior observed among some participants can be explained by the concept of perceived behavioral control, where individuals limit their public expression due to potential professional or social consequences. This also aligns with the well-documented attitude–behavior gap, where individuals may hold strong political views but choose not to express them openly. In contrast, more active participants—particularly those with professional expertise—utilize the affordances of social media to act as knowledge intermediaries, translating complex political issues into accessible information for broader audiences. This highlights how digital platforms enable differentiated roles in political communication, ranging from passive observers to active contributors. While most participants demonstrated some level of engagement, the findings also reveal variation in intensity and form, shaped by occupational risks, personal interests, and perceived stakes. This suggests that political engagement on social media is not uniform but stratified, reflecting how individuals negotiate visibility, risk, and influence within digital public spaces.

3. Transformation of Political Attitudes: The second important theme that emerged from the interviews related to the transformation of political attitudes through social media. In all the interviews, the interviewees agreed that social media had helped them become more politically aware by providing

them with access to diverse political views and sources of information. The interviewees described digital media as a space where one could become aware of the structural issues of society, such as inequality, government transparency, and accountability. As one participant noted:

I used to think problems were just personal, but now I see that they are structural.

(Key Informant 3)

This indicates a move from individual-level understandings to a more structural level of understanding of political and social issues. The interviewees described becoming more politically disenchanted with government institutions and practices through continuous exposure to political issues, discussions, and information on digital media. For young and politically active citizens, digital media helped them become politically knowledgeable by providing them with a space to learn about political issues. One participant explained:

Social media helps me understand how the system actually works, not just what is written in textbooks.

(Key Informant 4)

This indicates that digital media plays an important role in the development of political cognition by providing citizens with opportunities to become familiar with complex political ideas in a more accessible form. However, the interviewees agreed that despite providing citizens with access to diverse sources of information, digital media may also become a space for polarization. As one interviewee observed:

Sometimes discussions online become too extreme, and people stop listening to each other.

(Key Informant 1)

This indicates that while social media can enhance political awareness, it may simultaneously contribute to ideological fragmentation. Taken together, these findings suggest that social media plays a dual role in shaping political attitudes by both expanding access to political information and intensifying the dynamics of polarization within digital public spheres. This transformation of political attitudes reflects processes of political cognition, where continuous exposure to diverse information enhances individuals' ability to interpret structural issues beyond personal experiences. It also aligns with theories of mediated political learning, which suggest that digital environments facilitate the development of political knowledge through accessible and interactive content. However, the findings also highlight the presence of selective exposure and echo chamber dynamics, where individuals tend to engage with information that aligns with their existing beliefs. This process is shaped not only by platform algorithms but also by user-driven behaviors, such as following like-minded sources and avoiding conflicting viewpoints. While most participants reported increased political awareness, some participants expressed concerns about

information overload and emotional fatigue, which may limit deeper engagement with political content. This suggests that the relationship between social media exposure and political attitudes is not uniformly positive but mediated by individual capacities, digital environments, and patterns of content consumption.

4. Layers of Political Motivation: The interviews indicated that political motivation is multifaceted, shaped by a combination of economic concerns, professional responsibilities, and broader civic values. Among participants working in informal sectors or small businesses, political engagement was closely linked to economic survival. These individuals emphasized that government policies—particularly those related to taxation, energy prices, and economic management—have direct implications for their livelihoods. As one participant explained:

If fuel prices go up, it directly affects my income, so I have to pay attention to politics.

(Key Informant 8)

This highlights how material conditions can act as a primary driver of political engagement, especially for individuals whose economic stability is highly sensitive to policy changes. In contrast, participants in professional fields, including healthcare, law, and journalism, tended to frame their political engagement in terms of professional ethics and responsibility. For these individuals, participation in political discourse was seen as part of their role in promoting accuracy, fairness, and public accountability. As one participant noted:

I feel responsible for explaining the truth because misinformation can affect many people.

(Key Informant 18)

This suggests that political motivation in professional contexts is often shaped by normative commitments and ethical obligations, rather than solely by personal interests. Meanwhile, younger participants and activists frequently articulated their motivations in relation to future aspirations and democratic values. Issues such as social justice, human rights, and long-term societal development were commonly emphasized. As one participant stated:

I engage because I am worried about the future and what kind of society we will have.

(Key Informant 11)

This reflects a value-driven form of political motivation, where engagement is linked to broader visions of social change. Taken together, these findings suggest that political motivation is not driven by a single factor but emerges from multiple layers of personal experiences, economic conditions, and social values, shaping diverse forms of engagement across different social groups. This stratified structure of political motivation can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Economic survival reflects extrinsic motivation driven by

material needs, while professional responsibility and civic values represent more intrinsic forms of motivation grounded in ethical commitments and personal beliefs. The findings also align with Motivated Reasoning Theory, as individuals engage with political information in ways that are consistent with their personal interests, identities, and lived experiences. This explains why different groups prioritize different political issues, depending on how directly these issues affect their daily lives. While most participants demonstrated clear motivations for engagement, the intensity and direction of these motivations varied significantly across social groups. This variation suggests that political motivation is context-dependent and shaped by individuals' socioeconomic positions, professional roles, and future expectations, rather than being uniformly distributed across the population.

5. Hybrid Forms of Political Participation: The final theme emerging from the analysis concerns the diverse and evolving forms of political participation facilitated by social media. Participants indicated that political participation in contemporary society extends beyond traditional activities such as voting or attending protests, encompassing a wide range of digitally mediated practices. Many described engaging in political participation through online activities, including sharing information, discussing public issues, and raising awareness of political developments. As one participant explained:

I may not join protests, but I share information so others can understand what is happening.

(Key Informant 2)

This reflects how digital engagement can function as an alternative mode of participation, enabling individuals to contribute to public discourse without direct physical involvement. At the same time, the findings suggest that social media often operates as a bridge between online engagement and offline action. Participants reported using digital platforms to coordinate real-world activities, such as community initiatives, advocacy campaigns, and public demonstrations. As one participant noted:

Social media helps us organize and respond quickly when something happens.

(Key Informant 12)

This indicates that digital platforms play a crucial role in facilitating collective action by enabling rapid communication and coordination. In addition, some participants engaged in more indirect forms of political participation through economic and symbolic actions, including boycotting products, donating to activist groups, and supporting civic campaigns. As one participant stated:

Even if I don't speak out publicly, I support causes through my spending and donations.

(Key Informant 6)

This suggests that political participation may also take less visible, yet meaningful, forms, reflecting diverse strategies shaped by individual constraints and preferences. Taken together, these findings indicate that social media has expanded the scope of political participation by enabling hybrid forms of civic

engagement that integrate online communication with offline and indirect actions. In this sense, digital platforms function not only as communication tools but also as infrastructures that support more flexible and diversified forms of political participation in contemporary society. Taken together, these findings indicate that social media has expanded the scope of political participation by enabling hybrid forms of civic engagement that integrate online communication with offline and indirect actions. In this sense, digital platforms function not only as communication tools but also as infrastructures that support more flexible and diversified forms of political participation in contemporary society. This hybridization of political participation reflects the evolving nature of civic engagement in the digital era, where the boundaries between online and offline actions are increasingly blurred. It aligns with contemporary theories of digital participation, which emphasize that political engagement is no longer confined to institutionalized forms but extends to everyday practices mediated through digital platforms. The findings also highlight the role of platform affordances in facilitating different modes of participation, including direct expression, coordination of collective action, and indirect forms such as economic and symbolic engagement. These affordances enable individuals to choose participation strategies that align with their personal constraints, resources, and risk perceptions. While many participants actively engaged in hybrid forms of participation, some individuals preferred indirect or low-visibility strategies, such as sharing information anonymously or supporting causes through consumption practices. This variation suggests that political participation is shaped not only by opportunity structures provided by social media but also by individual considerations of risk, visibility, and efficacy.

Discussions

The findings of this study provide important insights into how social media functions as a key infrastructure shaping political engagement in contemporary Thai society. Rather than serving merely as a communication tool, social media emerges as a multidimensional environment that influences political awareness, attitudes, motivations, and participation across diverse social and occupational groups. The results indicate that digital platforms have become primary channels for accessing political information and monitoring public affairs, supporting prior research that highlights their role in expanding access to political content and facilitating ongoing engagement with public issues (Theocharis et al., 2022; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). However, the findings also suggest that the dynamics of digital political engagement in Thailand differ from Western contexts in important ways. In contrast to models that emphasize open expression and active participation, the Thai context is characterized by varying levels of perceived risk, leading to widespread practices of self-censorship and indirect forms of engagement. This highlights how political, cultural, and institutional conditions shape the ways in which social media is used for political purposes. At the same time, the findings reveal that political engagement on social media is not uniform but varies according to individuals' socio-economic positions and perceived risks. Engagement ranges from cautious observation and self-censorship to more active participation and public-oriented

knowledge sharing, consistent with previous studies on differentiated engagement strategies in digital environments (Pennington & Winfrey, 2021). In addition, the findings demonstrate that exposure to social media contributes to the transformation of political attitudes by increasing awareness of structural issues such as inequality, transparency, and government accountability. This aligns with existing research emphasizing the role of digital media in shaping political perceptions (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). The analysis further suggests that political motivation is layered and multifaceted, shaped by economic concerns, professional responsibilities, and broader civic values. This supports theoretical perspectives that conceptualize political engagement as emerging from the interaction between personal interests, ideological commitments, and social influences (Bolsen & Palm, 2019).

Finally, the findings indicate that social media facilitates hybrid forms of political participation that integrate online communication with offline civic action, reinforcing prior studies that highlight the expansion of participatory practices beyond traditional forms (Jost et al., 2018). From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that policymakers should recognize social media as a critical channel for public communication and engagement, particularly in contexts where traditional participation may be constrained. Efforts to improve transparency and trust should consider how digital platforms can be used to facilitate more inclusive and accessible forms of civic interaction. In addition, educators and civil society organizations should promote digital literacy to help individuals critically evaluate political information and navigate polarized online environments. Overall, this study suggests that social media should be understood not simply as a communication platform but as a form of political infrastructure that actively shapes how individuals perceive, interpret, and engage with political realities. In this sense, digital platforms play a critical role in reconfiguring the relationship between citizens, information, and political participation in contemporary society.

Limitations and Future Research: This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design and relatively small sample size of 18 participants limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focuses on specific occupational groups, which may not fully capture the diversity of political experiences in Thailand. Future research should consider employing mixed-method approaches to validate and expand these findings, allowing for broader generalization while maintaining in-depth insights.

Body of Knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by offering a qualitative and context-specific understanding of digital political engagement in Thailand. It reconceptualizes social media as a form of political infrastructure, emphasizing its role as an embedded system through which individuals access, interpret, and act upon political information in everyday life, thereby extending existing literature that primarily frames social media as a communication tool. In addition, the findings propose a stratified model of political motivation, demonstrating that individuals' engagement is shaped by overlapping factors, including economic survival, professional responsibility, and civic values, highlighting how motivation varies

across social and occupational positions rather than being uniformly distributed. Furthermore, the study identifies the emergence of hybrid and adaptive forms of political participation, in which individuals combine online, offline, and indirect modes of engagement, shaped by perceived risks, resource constraints, and personal preferences. Taken together, these contributions advance a more nuanced understanding of political engagement in non-Western contexts, particularly in societies where digital platforms simultaneously create opportunities for participation and impose constraints on political expression.

Suggestions

1. Recommendations for the application of the research findings

For policymakers, social media should be recognized as a critical channel for public communication and civic engagement, particularly in contexts where traditional forms of participation may be constrained. Efforts should focus on enhancing transparency, accessibility, and trust in digital communication to support more inclusive political engagement. For practitioners, including educators and civil society organizations, there is a need to promote digital literacy and critical media skills to help individuals navigate political information, avoid misinformation, and engage constructively in online discussions.

2. Recommendations for future research

The scholars should consider employing mixed method approaches to complement qualitative insights with quantitative data, as well as expanding the scope to include more diverse demographic groups in order to better understand variations in political engagement across different segments of society.

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