

Rethinking Platform Affordances: Digital Engagement and Youth Political Participation in Algorithmic Social Media

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between platform affordances, digital engagement, and political participation among young social media users. While existing literature often assumes that technological features inherently facilitate civic and political engagement, this study challenges the notion of a direct effect of platform affordances and instead emphasizes the role of user practices. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through an online survey of 100 young social media users and analyzed using multiple regression. The results show that platform affordances do not have a significant direct effect on political participation, whereas digital engagement emerges as a strong predictor. These findings indicate that active interaction with content, rather than the mere availability of technological features, plays a central role in shaping participatory outcomes. The descriptive analysis further reveals a gap between exposure and engagement: although users frequently encounter political content, their level of active interaction remains uneven. This suggests that exposure alone is insufficient to generate meaningful participation. This study contributes to the literature by proposing a distinction between affordance availability and affordance activation, highlighting digital engagement as the key mechanism linking technological environments to political behavior. By shifting attention from platform features to user practices, the study offers a more practice-oriented perspective on digital political participation.

Keywords: algorithmic platforms, digital engagement, political participation, social media affordances, youth participation

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of political participation, particularly among younger generations. Digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have emerged as central arenas where political information is accessed, circulated, and contested, often blending seamlessly with entertainment and everyday social interaction. This transformation has prompted scholars to examine how technological environments influence civic and political engagement, with a growing emphasis on the concept of platform affordances defined as the action possibilities enabled by technological features such as visibility, editability, persistence, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; boyd, 2010). These affordances are widely assumed to lower barriers to participation, enabling users to express opinions, mobilize networks, and engage in political discourse at unprecedented scales.

Despite these theoretical expectations, empirical findings on the relationship between platform affordances and political participation remain inconsistent. While some studies suggest that social media environments can enhance civic engagement and political expression (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), others highlight that the presence of technological features alone does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation (Evans et al., 2017). This discrepancy points to a critical limitation in affordance-based explanations: they tend to assume a direct link between technological structures and user outcomes, overlooking the role of user agency and practice. In other words, while affordances create possibilities for action, they do not guarantee that such possibilities will be realized.

In response to this limitation, recent scholarship has shifted attention toward the concept of digital engagement as a key explanatory factor. Digital engagement refers to the active involvement of users in interacting with content through practices such as liking, commenting, sharing, and producing media. Unlike affordances, which are embedded in platform design, engagement captures the behavioral dimension of media use and reflects how users appropriate technological

features in practice. A substantial body of research demonstrates that digital engagement is positively associated with political participation, both online and offline (Boulianne, 2015, 2020; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). These findings suggest that engagement may function as a crucial mechanism that translates the latent potential of digital platforms into concrete political action.

Building on this perspective, this study argues that platform affordances alone are insufficient to explain variations in youth political participation. Instead, the decisive factor lies in whether and how users actively engage with digital content. Affordances should therefore be conceptualized as enabling conditions rather than direct drivers of participation. Without active engagement, these affordances remain politically inert. This argument challenges technologically deterministic approaches that attribute causal power primarily to platform features and instead emphasizes the importance of user practices in shaping political outcomes (Hutchby, 2001; Nagy & Neff, 2015).

This issue plays out differently in the context of the Global South, including Indonesia, where patterns of social media use and political communication may differ from those commonly discussed in Western-centered literature. In Indonesia, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are widely used not only for entertainment but also for accessing, sharing, and responding to public and political issues. These platforms prioritize short-form, affective, and visually engaging content, which may influence not only how political information is consumed but also how it is acted upon. Rather than facilitating deliberative and rational-critical debate in the sense envisioned by Habermasian public sphere theory (Habermas, 1989), these environments may foster more personalized, emotional, and episodic forms of engagement, often described as “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2015).

Furthermore, emerging research suggests that exposure to political content on social media does not necessarily lead to active participation. Many users frequently encounter political information in their daily media routines but engage with it only intermittently. This phenomenon reflects what has been described as “low threshold” or “thin” participation, characterized by minimal effort and sporadic involvement (van Deth, 2014; Theocharis, 2015). Such patterns challenge binary distinctions between active and inactive citizens and point to the need for more nuanced frameworks that capture varying intensities of participation in digital environments.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the relationship between platform affordances, digital engagement, and political participation among young social media users. Specifically, it investigates whether platform affordances exert a direct influence on political participation, or whether their effects are contingent upon levels of digital engagement. By employing a quantitative approach based on survey data and multiple regression analysis, this study seeks to disentangle the relative contributions of structural (affordances) and behavioral (engagement) factors in shaping political participation.

The findings of this study contribute to the literature in three significant ways. First, they provide empirical evidence that platform affordances do not have a direct significant effect on political participation. This challenges prevailing assumptions that technological features inherently promote civic engagement and highlights the limitations of affordance-based explanations when considered in isolation. Second, the study demonstrates that digital engagement plays a substantial and statistically significant role in driving political participation, reinforcing the importance of user practices as the primary mechanism through which digital environments become politically meaningful. Third, by situating the analysis within a Global South context, this study expands the geographical scope of existing research and offers insights into how platform dynamics and user behavior interact in non-Western settings.

Ultimately, this study examines how Platform Affordances and Digital Engagement are associated with Political Participation among social media users. Rather than testing causal mechanisms, mediation, or moderation, the study is designed as an exploratory analysis of direct associations and predictive patterns. It is guided by three research questions: (1) How are Platform Affordances, Digital Engagement, and Political Participation distributed among respondents? (2) Are Platform Affordances and Digital Engagement associated with Political Participation? and (3) Which variable shows a stronger predictive relationship with Political Participation in the regression model? By foregrounding user practices, the study offers a practice-oriented perspective on digital political participation and contributes to affordance theory by distinguishing between affordance availability and affordance activation.

Ultimately, this study advances a conceptual shift from viewing social media as inherently democratizing technologies to understanding them as contingent infrastructures whose political implications depend on how they are used in practice. By foregrounding the role of digital engagement, it adopts a more practice-oriented approach to digital politics that recognizes the interplay between technological affordances, user agency, and sociocultural context. In doing so, the study contributes to affordance theory by reframing affordances not as inherent technological properties, but as contingent and practice-dependent conditions. Through the distinction between affordance availability and affordance activation, it offers a mechanism-based explanation that clarifies how and when affordances are translated into political participation. This perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding youth political participation in the digital age and offers important implications for fostering more meaningful forms of civic engagement.

2. Method

This study was conducted among social media users in Indonesia, and the findings should be interpreted as exploratory evidence rather than as nationally representative conclusions, with a particular focus on users who are actively exposed to digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The Indonesian context is relevant because social media platforms have become important spaces for accessing, discussing, and responding to political and public affairs issues. The study is grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, which assumes that social phenomena can be observed and measured, while acknowledging that relationships between variables are probabilistic rather than deterministic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach is suitable for examining associations between perceived platform affordances, digital engagement, and political participation in digital environments. This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between platform affordances, digital engagement, and political participation among young social media users. A cross-sectional survey approach was adopted to capture patterns of media use, engagement behaviors, and political participation at a single point in time. This design is appropriate for identifying statistical relationships between variables and for testing theoretically informed assumptions regarding the role of technological structures and user practices in shaping political behavior. The study is grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, which assumes that social phenomena can be observed and measured, while acknowledging that relationships between variables are probabilistic rather than deterministic. This approach is particularly suitable for examining the complex interplay between structural factors (platform affordances) and behavioral factors (digital engagement) in digital environments.

2.1 Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of young social media users, with a particular focus on individuals who are actively exposed to digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame, a non-probability sampling technique was employed, specifically purposive sampling. Respondents were selected based on the following criteria: (1) active use of social media platforms, and (2) prior exposure to political, social, or economic content online..

The study was not limited to a single social media platform. Although Instagram and TikTok were central examples because of their visual and algorithmic characteristics, respondents also reported using other platforms for accessing and engaging with political, social, and public affairs content. The main platforms represented in the sample included Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp/Telegram. This broader platform coverage reflects the multi-platform nature of social media use among respondents.

A total of 100 respondents participated in the survey. Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 51 years, with a mean age of 24.88 years and a median age of 23 years. Although the study focuses primarily on young social media users, the sample includes some older respondents. Therefore, the findings are interpreted as exploratory evidence from social media users who are actively exposed to public and political content online, rather than as representative evidence of a narrowly defined youth population. While this sample size may be considered modest, it is acceptable for exploratory regression analysis with a limited number of predictors and aligns with similar studies in digital media research that focus on exploratory modelling (Hair et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the limitations associated with non-probability sampling, sample size, and demographic variation are acknowledged and addressed in the Limitations section.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed online. The use of an online survey instrument is appropriate given the digital nature of the research topic and the target population's familiarity with online environments. The questionnaire was designed to capture three main dimensions: (1) platform affordances, (2) digital engagement, and (3) political participation.

In addition, the survey included demographic and behavioral items related to media use, such as preferred platforms, duration of social media use, frequency of exposure to political content, and time of day for accessing such content. These descriptive variables provide contextual insight into the media practices of respondents and support the interpretation of the main findings.

2.3 Measurement of Variables

All variables in this study were operationalized using self-reported questionnaire items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For each variable, item scores were summed to create a composite score. Platform affordances consisted of 15 items, with a possible score range of 15-75; Digital Engagements consisted of 4 items, with a possible score range of 4-20; and Political Participation consisted of 5 items, with a possible score range of 5-25. The low, medium, and high categories were determined a priori by dividing the theoretical score range of each variable into three proportional intervals. These categories were used for descriptive analysis, while the regression analysis used the composite scores. To clarify the operational distinction between variables, Digital Engagement refers to general modes of interaction with digital content, including liking, commenting, sharing, and joining discussions. Political Participation refers

more specifically to political or public affairs-oriented acts, such as following political information, sharing political content, expressing opinions on public issues, and joining discussions related to political, social, or economic issues. To improve measurement transparency, Table (1) presents the structure of each variable, including the number of items, possible score range, and the thresholds used to classify respondents into low, medium, and high categories.

Table 1. Measurement Structure and Category Thresholds

Variable	Items	Score Range	Low	Medium	High
Platform Affordances	15	15–75	15–35	36–55	56–75
Digital Engagement	4	4–20	4–9	10–14	15–20
Political Participation	5	5–25	5–11	12–18	19–25

2.3.1 Platform Affordances (X1)

Platform affordances were measured based on respondents' perceptions of key features commonly identified in the literature, including visibility, editability, persistence, association, and spreadability (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceive and utilize these features in their social media use. The resulting scores were categorized into three levels: low, medium, and high.

2.3.2 Digital Engagement (X2)

Digital engagement was operationalized as respondents' general interaction with digital content, including liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in discussions. This variable captures the behavioral dimension of media use and is not limited to explicitly political content.

2.3.3 Political Participation (Y)

Political Participation was measured using 5 items that assessed respondents' involvement in political, social, and public affairs activities through social media. In this study, political participation is understood broadly rather than being limited to formal electoral or party-based activities. It refers to respondents' involvement in public issues, civic expression, and issue-based participation through social media. The measure therefore includes activities such as following political information, sharing public affairs content, expressing opinions, joining online discussions, and responding to political, social, or economic issues when these issues are framed as matters of public concern. This broader understanding is appropriate for examining digitally mediated participation, where political expression often occurs through everyday interactions with social and public affairs content.

2.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the quality of measurement, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing prior to analysis. Content validity was established by aligning the questionnaire items with established theoretical constructs in the literature. Construct validity was assessed through theory-based item construction, ensuring that each item corresponded to the conceptual dimensions of its respective variable. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with a threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

The results showed that all variables met the minimum reliability criteria. Platform Affordances showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .936$), Digital Engagement showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .847$), and Political Participation showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .798$). Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .401 to .851 for Platform Affordances, from .516 to .757 for Digital Engagement, and from .173 to .738 for Political Participation. The relatively low item-total correlation for the voting item in the Political Participation scale may reflect the conceptual difference between electoral participation and digital or activist forms of participation. The item was retained because this study conceptualises political participation broadly, including online, offline, organisational, and electoral forms. Exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted because the study was designed as an exploratory model with a relatively limited sample size. Therefore, validity evidence is presented through theory-based item construction and internal consistency reliability rather than factor-analytic validation. To ensure the quality of measurement, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing prior to analysis. Content validity was established by aligning questionnaire items with established theoretical constructs in the literature. Construct validity was assessed using item-total correlations, ensuring that each item contributes meaningfully to its respective variable.

Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with a threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). All variables met the minimum reliability criteria, indicating that the measurement scales are consistent and suitable for further analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression to examine the influence of Platform Affordances (X1) and Digital Engagement (X2) on Political Participation (Y). This method allows for the simultaneous assessment of the independent effects of multiple predictors on a dependent variable, making it suitable for testing the study's hypotheses.

Prior to regression analysis, classical assumption tests were conducted to assess the suitability of the model. Normality was examined using histogram and normal probability plots to assess whether the residuals were approximately normally distributed. Heteroskedasticity was assessed to determine whether the variance of the residuals was constant across predicted values. A model meets the assumption of homoscedasticity when the residual variance remains relatively stable across the range of predicted values. Multicollinearity was also examined because high correlations among independent variables can inflate standard errors and make it difficult to assess the unique contribution of each predictor. The results indicated that the residuals were approximately normally distributed. The scatterplot did not show a clear pattern, suggesting that the assumption of homoscedasticity was reasonably met. The multicollinearity test also indicated no serious multicollinearity problem, as the tolerance value was 0.366 and the VIF value was 2.733.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Patterns of Platform Use and Participation

Before presenting the regression results, this section describes the distribution of the main variables in the study: Platform Affordances, Digital Engagement, and Political Participation. The descriptive analysis provides an overview of how respondents perceived platform features, interacted with digital content, and participated in political or public affairs activities through social media.

Table 2. Distribution of Platform Affordances, Digital Engagement, and Political Participation

Variable	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)
Platform Affordances	36	33	31
Digital Engagement	43	27	30
Political Participation	37	38	25

As shown in Table (2), the distribution of perceived Platform Affordances is relatively balanced, although slightly skewed toward lower levels. This pattern suggests that while technological features are widely available, not all users equally perceive or utilize the action possibilities embedded within social media platforms.

A more pronounced pattern emerges in relation to Digital Engagement. Despite relatively high levels of exposure to political content, engagement remains uneven, with a substantial proportion of respondents categorized at lower levels of interaction. This suggests that frequent exposure does not automatically lead to active engagement, highlighting a clear difference between passive consumption and interactive participation. Similar patterns have been noted in recent studies, where users often encounter political content but choose not to interact with it in meaningful ways (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

Political Participation, meanwhile, is largely concentrated at low to medium levels. This indicates that while engagement is present, it tends to be situational rather than sustained over time. Such patterns reflect a form of participation that exists but is not deeply embedded in everyday civic practices. Recent research has similarly described Digital Participation as fluid and episodic, shaped more by everyday routines than by structured political involvement (Theocharis et al., 2021).

Although respondents spend considerable time on social media, their active engagement with political or public affairs content remains uneven. This suggests that political engagement is often embedded within broader everyday media practices rather than occurring as a separate or consistently planned civic activity. This aligns with findings that position political engagement as part of broader digital habits rather than a distinct or formal mode of participation (Vromen et al., 2022). These patterns help explain the regression results discussed earlier. The relationship between digital environments and political participation appears to depend less on the availability of platform features and more on how users choose to interact with content. The gap between exposure and engagement becomes especially important here, as it highlights the need to distinguish clearly between simply encountering information and actively participating in political discourse (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

3.2 Regression Results

This section presents the results of the multiple linear regression analysis examining the influence of platform affordances and digital engagement on political participation. Table (3) shows that the model demonstrates strong explanatory power, accounting for 68.7% of the variance in political participation ($R^2 = 0.687$). This indicates that the independent variables included in the model can explain a substantial proportion of variation in participatory behavior among respondents.

Table 3. Effects of Platform Affordances and Digital Engagement on Political Participation

Variable	β (Standardized)	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
Platform Affordances (X1)	0.089	1.472	0.144
Digital Engagement (X2)	0.792	11.356	0.000***

Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F-value	Sig.
0.829	0.687	0.681	106.47	0.000

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine whether Platform Affordances and Digital Engagement were associated with Political Participation. The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 97) = 106.565$, $p < .001$, with $R^2 = .687$ and adjusted $R^2 = .681$. Platform Affordances was not a statistically significant predictor of Political Participation, $B = .048$, $SE = .032$, $t(97) = 1.473$, $p = .144$, 95% CI $[-.017, .112]$. Digital Engagement was a significant positive predictor, $B = .792$, $SE = .104$, $t(97) = 7.612$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[.585, .998]$. These findings indicate that Digital Engagement was more strongly associated with Political Participation than perceived Platform Affordances. The robustness check using HC3 robust standard errors produced substantively similar results. Digital Engagement remained significant, $B = .792$, robust $SE = .108$, $p < .001$, while Platform Affordances remained non-significant, $B = .048$, robust $SE = .029$, $p = .103$. This suggests that the main regression findings are robust to heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimation.

These findings suggest that platform affordances were significantly associated with Political Participation. Whereas, Digital Engagement showed a strong and statistically significant association. This indicates that differences in political participation are more closely related to users' active interaction with digital content, rather than by their perceptions of platform features alone. In other words, the availability of platform affordances does not automatically translate into participatory outcomes. Participation appears to depend more on how users engage with content in practice. To illustrate these relationships, Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the regression model.

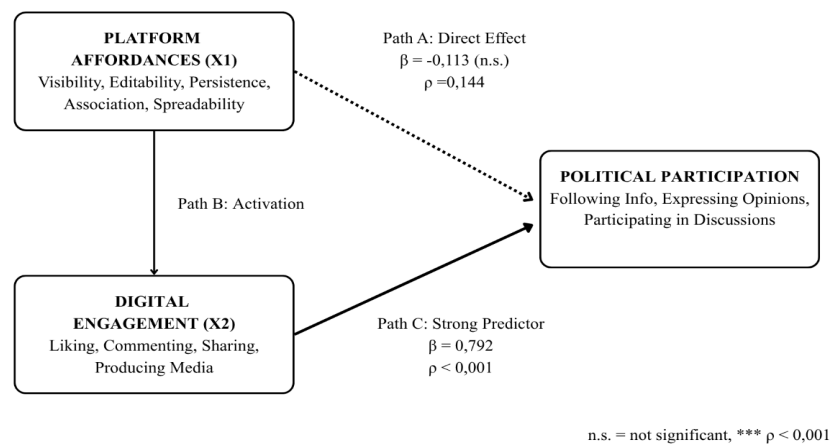


Figure 1. Regression Models

As shown in Figure 1, the direct relationship between platform affordances and political participation is not statistically significant ($p = 0.144$), indicating that technological features alone do not directly drive participatory outcomes. In contrast, digital engagement emerges as a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.792$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting its role as the key mechanism through which affordances are translated into political participation. Overall, these findings suggest that the relationship between digital environments and political participation is not determined solely by the availability of technological features. Rather, it is shaped by the extent to which users actively engage with content, reinforcing the importance of user practices as the primary driver of participatory outcomes.

4. Discussion

4.1 Platform Affordances as Structural Conditions: Explaining the Absence of Direct Effects

One of the central findings of this study is the absence of a statistically significant relationship between platform affordances and political participation. As shown in Table (3), platform affordances do not exert a direct effect on participation, despite the strong explanatory power of the overall model. This result challenges a long-standing assumption in the literature that treats social media features as inherent drivers of civic and political engagement. Recent studies have begun to question this assumption, showing that the presence of technological features alone does not necessarily translate into meaningful forms of participation, particularly in algorithmically curated environments (Klinger & Svensson, 2018).

Earlier scholarship has emphasized that affordances such as visibility, persistence, editability, and association can lower barriers to participation and expand opportunities for political expression (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; boyd, 2010). Within this view, platform architecture is often seen as inherently enabling. However, the findings here suggest that this perspective may overestimate the direct influence of technology. Simply put, having the tools available does not mean they will be used in ways that lead to participation.

Instead, affordances seem to operate more as background conditions that shape what is possible, rather than what actually happens. Their effects depend on how users interpret and make use of these features in practice. This reading is consistent with

the descriptive patterns discussed earlier, where users do not engage with platform features in uniform or predictable ways.

From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with relational approaches to affordances (Hutchby, 2001) and the idea of imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015), which both stress that technologies only become meaningful through use. More recent work has pushed this further by highlighting how platform environments, especially those driven by algorithms, actively shape how affordances are experienced and enacted (Bucher, 2018; Klinger & Svensson, 2018; Flew & Iosifidis, 2020).

This is particularly relevant in the context of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where visibility is no longer just a matter of user action, but is heavily influenced by engagement metrics. In these environments, posting or sharing content does not guarantee reach or impact. Instead, content becomes visible only when it aligns with algorithmic signals such as likes, comments, and watch time. As a result, the effectiveness of affordances is closely tied to patterns of engagement.

Seen from this perspective, it becomes clearer why affordances do not show a direct effect on political participation. Users may have the ability to express opinions or share political content, but these actions only become meaningful when they are part of broader patterns of active engagement. Without that, affordances remain largely unused or have limited impact. In this sense, they are better understood as necessary but not sufficient conditions for participation.

These findings suggest that we need to rethink how affordances are positioned in studies of digital political behavior. Rather than treating them as direct causal drivers, it may be more useful to see them as enabling structures whose effects depend on how they are taken up in practice. This shift helps move the analysis away from a technology-centered view toward a more grounded understanding of how participation actually unfolds in everyday digital life.

4.2 Digital Engagement and Affordance Activation

In contrast to the non-significant role of platform affordances, digital engagement emerges as a strong and statistically significant predictor of political participation. As shown in Table (3), digital engagement exerts a substantial effect ($\beta = 0.792$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that variations in participation are primarily shaped by differences in how users actively interact with digital content. This pattern reflects a broader shift observed in recent research, where engagement—not mere access to technological features—plays a decisive role in shaping political behavior in digital environments (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

These findings redirect attention away from technological structures and toward user practices. While affordances define what users can potentially do, engagement marks the point where these possibilities are put into use. In this sense, engagement is not just an outcome but a process through which technological features become meaningful in practice. Recent studies have emphasized this shift, arguing that digital participation increasingly depends on how users navigate, interpret, and interact with platform environments rather than on the features themselves (Valenzuela et al., 2022).

The descriptive patterns presented in Section 3.1 further support this interpretation. Although exposure to political content is relatively high, levels of active engagement remain uneven. A significant proportion of users remain at low levels of interaction, suggesting that encountering political content alone does not necessarily lead to participation. This gap between exposure and engagement has been widely noted in recent work on algorithmic media, where users are often passive recipients of content rather than active contributors (Cotter, 2019).

This distinction highlights an important difference between passive exposure and active engagement. Exposure signals awareness, but engagement signals action. Without that shift from observing to interacting, the presence of affordances and political content has limited impact. Engagement, in this sense, acts as a conversion point—where digital encounters are transformed into participatory behavior.

Building on this, the study introduces a distinction between affordance availability and affordance activation. Availability refers to the presence of technological features, while activation refers to how those features are used. Engagement becomes the observable form of this activation. This helps explain why affordances alone do not produce direct effects, as shown earlier, and why participation depends on what users do rather than what platforms offer.

This interpretation is consistent with a growing body of research showing that active media use is more closely tied to political participation than passive consumption (Boulianne, 2020). What this study adds is a clearer explanation of how that relationship works. Engagement is not simply associated with participation—it is the mechanism through which participation becomes possible. The importance of engagement becomes even more evident in algorithm-driven environments. On platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, engagement signals—likes, comments, shares, watch time—play a central role in determining what content becomes visible. Content that generates interaction is more likely to be amplified, while content that does not remains largely unseen. This creates a feedback loop in which engagement both reflects and shapes participation (Klinger & Svensson, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2021).

Under these conditions, engagement operates on two levels. At the individual level, it reflects how users participate. At the platform level, it determines how political content circulates. Without engagement, political content remains peripheral; with engagement, it gains visibility and reach. This dual role helps explain why engagement emerges as such a strong predictor in the model.

These findings point to the limits of technology-centered explanations of political participation. What matters is not only what platforms enable, but how users take up those possibilities in practice. By focusing on engagement as the mechanism that activates affordances, this study offers a more grounded way of understanding how political participation unfolds in contemporary digital environments.

4.3 Youth Political Participation in Algorithmic Environments

Beyond the statistical relationships identified in the regression analysis, the findings of this study point to a broader reconfiguration of youth political participation in contemporary digital environments. Rather than falling neatly into high or low categories, participation appears uneven and moderate, often taking place in situational and episodic ways.

As shown in Table (3), political participation is largely concentrated in the low to medium range. This suggests that engagement among young users is present but not deeply embedded in sustained or institutionalized forms of civic involvement. Similar patterns have been observed in recent research, where digital participation is described as fluid, personalized, and intermittent rather than stable or continuous (Theocharis et al., 2021; Boulianne, 2020; Vromen et al., 2022).

One important factor shaping this shift is the platform environment in which participation takes place. The growing dominance of visually driven and algorithmically curated platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has transformed how political expression appears in everyday life. Political content is increasingly embedded within entertainment, short-form video, and affective narratives, leading participation to take lighter forms—such as liking, sharing, or reacting—rather than sustained discussion or organized civic action. These formats tend to prioritize visibility and circulation over depth, making engagement more immediate but often less deliberative (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Literat, 2023).

At the same time, this shift reflects a broader move toward everyday and routine forms of political expression, where participation becomes embedded in ordinary media practices rather than confined to formal political arenas (Vromen et al., 2015; Ekström, 2016). In these environments, participation is increasingly personalized and shaped by individual networks, preferences, and identities. This aligns with the notion of connective participation, where engagement is less oriented toward collective mobilization and more toward individualized forms of expression within digitally mediated spaces (Valenzuela et al., 2022).

Within this context, engagement takes on a dual role. At the individual level, it reflects how users participate—through actions like commenting, sharing, or reacting. At the platform level, it also acts as a signal that determines which content is amplified. In other words, engagement not only expresses participation but also helps structure the visibility of political content itself. This helps explain why engagement emerges as such a strong predictor in this study.

These patterns do not necessarily point to a decline in political participation, but rather to a shift in how participation is practiced. Rather than indicating disengagement, existing research suggests that young people often participate in more informal, expressive, and digitally mediated ways embedded in everyday communication practices (Vromen et al., 2015; Theocharis, 2015; Boulianne, 2020). Political engagement becomes part of daily digital routines rather than a separate or deliberate activity. In the context of the Global South, and particularly Indonesia, these dynamics are further shaped by high levels of social media use and the concentration of platform ecosystems. For many young users, social media is not just a source of information but a primary space for social interaction, identity work, and cultural expression. This makes political participation more intertwined with everyday digital practices, often blurring the line between political and non-political engagement.

These findings suggest that youth political participation today is best understood as something evolving rather than declining. It is shaped by the interaction between platform design, algorithmic systems, and user practices, and often takes forms that are brief, affective, and embedded in daily life. Understanding this shift requires moving beyond traditional models of participation and paying closer attention to how engagement unfolds in practice.

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study used a non-probability sample of 100 respondents. Although this sample size is acceptable for exploratory regression analysis with a limited number of predictors, it limits the statistical power, precision, and generalisability of the findings. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as indicative of patterns among the respondents studied rather than as representative of all young social media users. Second, the cross-sectional survey design captures respondents' perceptions, engagement practices, and political participation at a single point in time; therefore, the study cannot establish causal direction between Platform Affordances, Digital Engagement, and Political Participation. Third, this study does not make platform-specific comparisons because the survey was not designed to produce balanced subgroups across different social media platforms. Future research with larger and more evenly distributed platform samples is needed to examine whether Platform Affordances, Digital Engagement, and Political Participation differ across specific platforms.

6. Conclusion

This study challenges technologically deterministic assumptions by showing that perceived platform affordances were not significantly associated with youth political participation when digital engagement was included in the model. Instead, digital engagement showed a stronger relationship with political participation. This suggests that the political relevance of social media depends not only on the availability of platform features, but also on how users actively engage with digital content.

Theoretically, this study contributes to a more practice-oriented understanding of digital politics by shifting analytical attention from platform features to user behavior. It refines existing discussions of youth participation by showing that engagement in algorithmic environments is often episodic, low-intensity, and embedded in everyday digital practices, consistent with contemporary forms of networked and affective participation.

Empirically, the study extends research on digital participation in the Global South by highlighting how platform dominance and algorithmic curation shape engagement patterns among young users. For practice, the results imply that efforts to strengthen political participation should focus not only on expanding technological access or platform affordances, but also on fostering more meaningful forms of user engagement. Future research should further examine the conditions under which engagement becomes politically relevant, particularly in relation to algorithmic visibility, digital literacy, and sociocultural context.

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Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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