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Strengthening Youth Civic Engagement through Social Media in Tunisia

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This study examines the role of social media in strengthening youth civic engagement in Tunisia following the Arab Spring revolution. Tunisia's democratic transition has created unique opportunities for young citizens to participate in political discourse through digital platforms. This research explores how Tunisian youth utilize social media tools including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to engage in civic activities, political mobilization, and democratic participation. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and interviews with 450 young Tunisians aged 18-35, the study reveals that social media significantly enhances political awareness, facilitates collective action, and enables direct communication with political representatives. However, challenges including misinformation, digital divides, and governmental surveillance persist. The findings demonstrate that while social media platforms have democratized civic participation, sustainable engagement requires addressing structural barriers and promoting digital literacy among Tunisian youth.

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring revolution of 2010-2011 fundamentally transformed Tunisia's political landscape, establishing the country as a beacon of democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa region. Central to this transformation was the unprecedented role of social media in mobilizing citizens, particularly young people, to participate in political discourse and civic action. As Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) argue, social media platforms have emerged as critical tools for political engagement, enabling citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers and participate directly in democratic processes. In Tunisia, where approximately 64% of the population is under 35 years old, understanding how digital technologies shape youth civic engagement has become essential for strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring inclusive governance. The intersection of youth demographics, technological advancement, and political transition creates a unique context for examining the relationship between social media and civic participation in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

The concept of civic engagement encompasses a broad range of activities through which citizens participate in the political and social life of their communities, from voting and campaigning to volunteering and community organizing. Ekman and Amnå (2012) distinguish between manifest and latent forms of civic engagement, emphasizing that contemporary youth participation often occurs through non-traditional channels that may not be immediately visible through conventional measures. Social media platforms have fundamentally altered the landscape of civic engagement by lowering barriers to participation, enabling horizontal communication networks, and facilitating rapid information dissemination. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) demonstrate that social media use is positively associated with various forms of political participation, including both online and offline activities. In the Tunisian context, these platforms have become primary spaces where young citizens consume news, discuss political issues, and organize collective action, making them indispensable to understanding contemporary civic engagement patterns.

Tunisia's unique position as the only country to successfully transition to democracy following the Arab Spring makes it a compelling case study for examining youth civic engagement through social media. The country's relatively high internet penetration rate of approximately 72% and widespread smartphone adoption have created favorable conditions for digital civic participation. Lerner (2010) notes that successful democratic transitions require active citizen participation, particularly among younger generations who will shape the nation's political future. However, Tunisian youth face significant challenges including high unemployment rates exceeding 35%, limited economic opportunities, and disillusionment with traditional political institutions. These socioeconomic factors influence how young people engage with politics and whether they view civic participation as meaningful. Social media platforms offer alternative pathways for

engagement that may resonate more strongly with youth who feel disconnected from conventional political processes.

The relationship between social media use and civic engagement is complex and multifaceted, encompassing both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation. Theocharis and van Deth (2018) identify social media activism as a distinct form of political engagement characterized by digitally mediated actions such as sharing political content, signing online petitions, and participating in hashtag campaigns. These activities complement rather than replace traditional forms of civic engagement, creating hybrid participation patterns that combine online and offline actions. In Tunisia, social media platforms have facilitated youth participation in various civic activities including monitoring elections, advocating for policy reforms, and holding government officials accountable. Vaccari et al. (2015) argue that social media's interactive features enable forms of political expression and mobilization that were previously impossible, particularly for marginalized groups who lack access to traditional media platforms. However, the same technologies that enable civic engagement also present risks including echo chambers, polarization, and the spread of misinformation.

Despite the potential of social media to strengthen civic engagement, significant barriers limit its effectiveness in promoting inclusive and sustained youth participation in Tunisia. The digital divide remains a critical challenge, with disparities in internet access and digital literacy across geographic, socioeconomic, and gender lines. Norris (2001) conceptualizes the digital divide as encompassing not only access to technology but also the skills and resources necessary to use it effectively for civic purposes. Rural areas in Tunisia experience lower connectivity rates and slower internet speeds, limiting opportunities for youth civic engagement through digital platforms. Additionally, concerns about online surveillance and the legal consequences of political expression on social media create a chilling effect that may discourage authentic civic participation. Howard and Hussain (2013) document how authoritarian regimes and transitional governments employ digital monitoring and control mechanisms to limit online political activism. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing strategies to maximize social media's potential for strengthening youth civic engagement in Tunisia.

The existing literature on social media and civic engagement in Tunisia remains limited, with most research focusing on the role of digital technologies during the revolutionary period rather than the sustained patterns of youth participation in the post-transition context. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) examined social media's role in mobilizing protesters during the Arab Spring but acknowledged the need for longitudinal research on how these technologies shape ongoing civic engagement. Ghannam (2011) provided an early assessment of social media's impact on Arab youth activism but emphasized the importance of studying how initial revolutionary enthusiasm translates into sustained democratic participation. Recent studies by Breuer et al. (2015) suggest that social media's impact on civic engagement varies significantly across different national contexts and political systems, highlighting the

need for country-specific research. This study addresses these gaps by examining how Tunisian youth currently utilize social media platforms for civic engagement, the factors that facilitate or hinder their participation, and the implications for democratic consolidation in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to comprehensively examine how social media strengthens youth civic engagement in Tunisia. The quantitative component consisted of a structured online survey administered to 450 Tunisian youth aged 18-35 across all 24 governorates, utilizing stratified random sampling to ensure geographic and demographic representativeness. As Creswell and Clark (2017) advocate, mixed-methods approaches enable researchers to triangulate findings and gain deeper insights into complex social phenomena by combining the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative understanding. The survey instrument included validated scales measuring social media usage patterns, civic engagement behaviors, political efficacy, and democratic attitudes, adapted from established measures developed by Boulianne (2015) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014). Participants were recruited through multiple channels including universities, youth organizations, and social media platforms, with data collection occurring over a three-month period from March to May 2024. The survey achieved a response rate of 68%, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression modeling to identify relationships between social media use and various dimensions of civic engagement.

The qualitative component involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 45 participants selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse experiences with social media-based civic engagement, including activists, student leaders, political party youth members, and ordinary social media users. Following the methodological guidance of Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, interviews explored participants' motivations for civic engagement, their use of specific social media platforms, perceived barriers and facilitators to participation, and experiences with online activism and political expression. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted in Arabic or French based on participant preference, then transcribed and translated for analysis. The thematic analysis process involved multiple rounds of coding to identify recurring patterns, themes, and narratives related to social media's role in shaping youth civic engagement. As Guest et al. (2006) and (Muhsyanur et al., 2022)suggest, this sample size was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation while maintaining analytical depth. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant confidentiality, and protecting respondents from potential risks associated with discussing political activities in a transitional democratic context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Social Media Platforms and Youth Political Awareness

Social media platforms have emerged as primary sources of political information and news for Tunisian youth, fundamentally reshaping how young citizens access and engage with political content. The survey results revealed that 78% of respondents regularly use social media to follow political news, with Facebook (89%), Instagram (67%), and Twitter (45%) serving as the most common platforms for political information consumption. Bode (2016) demonstrates that incidental exposure to political content on social media increases political knowledge even among users who do not actively seek such information, a phenomenon particularly relevant in Tunisia where algorithmic curation and peer sharing frequently surface political content. Qualitative interviews revealed that young Tunisians value social media's ability to provide diverse perspectives and alternative narratives that challenge official media accounts, with one participant explaining, "On social media, I can see what different political parties, activists, and journalists are saying about the same issue, which helps me form my own opinion."

The role of social media in enhancing political awareness extends beyond passive information consumption to include active knowledge construction through participatory practices. Kahne and Bowyer (2017) identify participatory politics as encompassing activities where young people investigate, share, discuss, and create political content, processes that collectively strengthen political understanding and engagement. Among surveyed Tunisian youth, 64% reported regularly discussing political issues with peers through social media platforms, while 52% shared political content such as news articles, videos, or infographics. These practices facilitate peer-to-peer political learning and expose young people to information and perspectives they might not encounter through traditional media or family networks. The interactive nature of social media platforms enables youth to ask questions, challenge claims, and engage in deliberative discussions that deepen their political understanding and critical thinking skills.

However, the relationship between social media use and political awareness is complicated by concerns about information quality, misinformation, and echo chambers. Guess et al. (2020) found that while social media exposes users to diverse information, algorithmic curation and selective exposure can create filter bubbles that reinforce existing beliefs rather than broadening perspectives. Among Tunisian respondents, 71% expressed concerns about the accuracy of political information on social media, and 58% reported encountering misinformation or propaganda. Qualitative interviews revealed sophisticated media literacy practices among some young Tunisians who cross-reference information across multiple sources and critically evaluate content credibility. However, others acknowledged struggling to distinguish reliable information from misinformation, particularly regarding complex policy issues or politically charged topics where competing narratives proliferate.

The democratization of information through social media has enabled Tunisian youth to access political content previously controlled by state media or elite institutions, contributing to a more informed and critically engaged citizenry. Loader et al. (2014) argue that social media's horizontal communication structures challenge traditional top-down information flows, empowering citizens to become both consumers and producers of political knowledge. Survey data indicated that 43% of young Tunisians trust social media sources more than traditional media for political information, particularly regarding issues like corruption, government accountability, and youth-specific concerns. This shift reflects both the failures of traditional media institutions to adequately represent youth perspectives and the success of social media platforms in providing accessible, relevant, and diverse political content that resonates with young audiences.

Despite these benefits, the quality and depth of political awareness developed through social media remain contested. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) distinguish between connective and collective action, noting that social media facilitates loosely organized networks that may produce engagement without necessarily developing deep political understanding or sustained commitment. Among interviewed participants, several acknowledged that while social media increased their awareness of political issues, it sometimes promoted superficial engagement characterized by consuming headlines rather than in-depth analysis or engaging with complex policy debates. The challenge for Tunisian democracy lies in harnessing social media's potential for raising political awareness while promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and engagement with substantive political content that extends beyond viral posts and sensationalized narratives.

Social Media as a Tool for Political Mobilization and Collective Action

Social media platforms have become essential infrastructure for organizing and coordinating collective action among Tunisian youth, enabling rapid mobilization around political causes and social issues. The survey revealed that 56% of respondents had participated in at least one online campaign or digital petition, while 38% had used social media to coordinate or promote offline protests, demonstrations, or civic events. Tufekci (2017) argues that social media reduces the coordination costs of collective action by providing tools for rapid information dissemination, network building, and resource mobilization that were previously available only to well-resourced organizations. In Tunisia, youth activists have successfully utilized platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organize protests against government corruption, advocate for economic reforms, and mobilize support for environmental causes, demonstrating social media's capacity to facilitate both reactive and proactive forms of political mobilization.

The organizational dynamics of social media-based mobilization differ significantly from traditional forms of collective action led by formal organizations or political parties (Muhsyanur, 2025). Bennett (2012) identifies digitally networked action as characterized by personalized public engagement, where individuals share

common concerns and coordinate actions without requiring formal organizational structures or ideological alignment. Interview participants described how hashtag campaigns such as #Fech_Nestannew (What are we waiting for) and #Manich_Msameh (I will not forgive) enabled decentralized coordination among thousands of young Tunisians who might not identify with specific political parties but shared concerns about unemployment, corruption, and democratic accountability. One activist explained, "Social media allows us to mobilize quickly without needing permission from party leaders or organizational hierarchies. If enough people care about an issue, we can create momentum within hours."

However, the effectiveness of social media mobilization in achieving substantive political outcomes remains debated, with scholars questioning whether online activism translates into meaningful offline change. Morozov (2011) critiques "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" as superficial forms of engagement that create the appearance of activism without requiring significant commitment or producing tangible results. Among surveyed Tunisian youth, 47% acknowledged that they sometimes engaged in low-effort online activism such as liking posts or changing profile pictures without taking further action. Qualitative interviews revealed mixed perspectives, with some participants viewing online actions as valuable for raising awareness and building solidarity even when not accompanied by offline participation, while others criticized purely digital activism as insufficient for creating real political change. The relationship between online and offline activism appears complex, with social media serving as both a complement to traditional activism and, in some cases, a substitute that may reduce rather than enhance overall civic engagement.

The success of social media mobilization in Tunisia has been most evident in campaigns that effectively bridge online and offline spaces, combining digital coordination with physical presence and sustained pressure. Earl and Kimport (2011) distinguish between e-mobilization, which uses digital tools to support traditional activism, and e-movements, which exist primarily online, arguing that hybrid approaches often prove most effective for achieving political goals. The #Manich_Msameh campaign against political corruption exemplifies this hybrid model, utilizing social media to organize coordinated street protests across multiple cities while maintaining constant online pressure through posts, videos, and live updates. Survey data indicated that 62% of respondents believed social media was most effective when combined with offline activism rather than serving as a standalone tool for political engagement.

The role of social media in facilitating collective action also raises questions about leadership, sustainability, and the relationship between spontaneous mobilization and institutional political participation. Gladwell (2010) argues that social media activism lacks the strong ties and hierarchical structures necessary for sustained, high-risk activism, potentially limiting its effectiveness for fundamental political change. In the Tunisian context, interview participants noted that while social media enables rapid mobilization, campaigns often struggle with

sustainability once initial momentum fades or when faced with government resistance or public indifference. Several activists described the challenge of transitioning from viral social media campaigns to building enduring movements or translating online support into electoral participation, policy changes, or institutional reforms. These limitations suggest that while social media significantly enhances youth capacity for political mobilization, its effectiveness depends on integration with broader civic infrastructure and strategic planning that extends beyond digital platforms.

Digital Democracy and Youth-Government Interaction

Social media platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for direct communication between Tunisian youth and political representatives, potentially enhancing government responsiveness and democratic accountability. The survey found that 41% of young respondents had contacted elected officials or government agencies through social media platforms, while 53% followed at least one politician or government institution on social media. Mergel (2013) identifies social media as transforming government-citizen relationships by enabling two-way communication, transparency, and collaborative governance that move beyond traditional one-directional information dissemination. In Tunisia, municipal governments, parliamentary representatives, and government ministries have established social media presences that provide platforms for young citizens to ask questions, voice concerns, and participate in policy discussions that were previously inaccessible to ordinary citizens.

Figure 1. Collaborates With Tunisian Government and The Danish-Arab Partnership Programme To Empower Youth in Tunisia

The interactive features of social media platforms enable forms of political expression and accountability that challenge traditional power dynamics between citizens and authorities. Gainous and Wagner (2014) argue that social media

empowers citizens by providing tools for political expression, mobilization, and oversight that reduce information asymmetries and increase government transparency. Among interviewed participants, several described using social media to document government failures, expose corruption, or publicly challenge official narratives, with one stating, "When we post about problems in our neighborhoods or tag government officials, sometimes we get responses or action. It's not perfect, but it's more direct access than we've ever had before." The public nature of social media interactions creates pressure for government responsiveness, as officials' responses or non-responses are visible to broader audiences and can affect their political reputations.

However, the quality and authenticity of youth-government interaction through social media vary considerably, with concerns about performative engagement, symbolic responsiveness, and the manipulation of digital platforms for propaganda purposes. Fung (2015) warns that governments may use social media for "democracy theater" that creates the appearance of participation without genuine power-sharing or policy influence. Survey respondents expressed skepticism about government social media initiatives, with only 34% believing that officials genuinely considered citizen input from social media, and 59% viewing government social media presence as primarily for public relations rather than authentic engagement. Qualitative interviews revealed frustration among youth activists who described government social media teams posting generic responses or ignoring substantive questions while highlighting superficial achievements or photo opportunities.

The potential for social media to facilitate meaningful democratic participation is further complicated by digital surveillance and the legal risks associated with online political expression in Tunisia's transitional democracy. Dencik et al. (2016) document how governments use social media monitoring to track activists, suppress dissent, and control political discourse under the guise of security or counter-terrorism measures. Among surveyed youth, 68% expressed concerns about government surveillance of their social media activities, and 44% reported self-censoring political expression online due to fear of legal consequences or professional repercussions. These concerns are grounded in reality, as Tunisian authorities have prosecuted individuals for social media posts deemed offensive to public officials or threatening to public order, creating a chilling effect that limits the democratic potential of digital platforms.

Despite these challenges, social media has undeniably expanded the spaces and opportunities for youth political expression and democratic participation in Tunisia, even if these opportunities remain constrained and contested. Papacharissi (2010) conceptualizes social media as creating "private spheres" of public expression that enable citizen-driven agenda-setting and political discourse outside traditional institutional controls. The survey data revealed that young Tunisians use social media to engage with a wide range of democratic activities including monitoring government performance (48%), participating in policy consultations (27%), and organizing advocacy campaigns (31%). While these activities do not always produce

immediate policy outcomes, they contribute to democratic culture by normalizing citizen participation, challenging elite monopolies on political discourse, and creating expectations for government transparency and responsiveness that may strengthen democratic accountability over time.

Barriers and Challenges to Sustained Civic Engagement

Despite social media's potential for strengthening youth civic engagement, multiple structural, technological, and sociopolitical barriers limit its effectiveness in promoting inclusive and sustained democratic participation in Tunisia. The digital divide remains a fundamental challenge, with significant disparities in internet access, device ownership, and digital literacy across geographic, socioeconomic, and educational lines. Scheerder et al. (2017) distinguish between first-level digital divides related to access and second-level divides related to skills and usage patterns, arguing that both dimensions shape who can effectively participate in digital civic spaces. Survey data revealed that youth in rural areas (54%) and those from lower-income families (49%) reported less frequent social media use for civic purposes compared to urban, middle-class counterparts (76%), reflecting underlying inequalities in connectivity infrastructure and device ownership that exclude significant segments of Tunisian youth from digital civic engagement.

Table 1. Barriers to Social Media-Based Civic Engagement Among Tunisian Youth

Barrier Category	Specific Challenge	Percentage Reporting
Access & Infrastructure	Limited internet connectivity in rural areas	42%
	Lack of personal devices (smartphone/computer)	28%
	High cost of mobile data	51%
Digital Literacy	Difficulty evaluating information credibility	63%
	Limited technical skills for content creation	37%
	Lack of knowledge about privacy/security settings	58%
Political & Legal	Fear of government surveillance	68%
	Concerns about legal consequences	44%
	Self-censorship of political expression	56%
Social & Cultural	Family or community disapproval	31%
	Gender-based restrictions (particularly for women)	23%
	Disillusionment with political system	67%

Barrier Category	Specific Challenge	Percentage Reporting
Platform-Related	Misinformation and fake news	71%
	Echo chambers and polarization	48%
	Algorithmic manipulation	39%

The second-level digital divide related to skills and meaningful usage presents additional barriers to effective civic engagement through social media. Van Dijk (2020) argues that digital skills encompass operational competencies for using technologies and strategic competencies for leveraging them to achieve personal and civic goals, with significant variation in these capacities across different population groups. Among surveyed Tunisian youth, 63% reported difficulty evaluating the credibility of political information on social media, while 58% lacked knowledge about privacy and security settings that could protect them from surveillance or harassment. These skill gaps limit young people's capacity to engage safely and effectively in digital civic spaces, potentially excluding those who lack the educational background or resources to develop sophisticated digital literacies. Interview participants from rural areas and lower educational backgrounds described feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information on social media and uncertain about how to verify claims or contribute meaningfully to political discussions.

Political disillusionment and declining trust in democratic institutions represent significant psychological and motivational barriers to sustained youth civic engagement through social media or other channels. Henn and Foard (2014) document widespread political alienation among young people who feel that formal political institutions are unresponsive to their concerns and that civic participation is unlikely to produce meaningful change. Among surveyed Tunisian youth, 67% expressed disillusionment with the political system, 59% believed their voices did not matter to decision-makers, and 52% felt that Tunisia's democratic transition had failed to deliver promised improvements in governance or economic opportunity. This disillusionment manifests in declining participation in both traditional civic activities like voting (where youth turnout has decreased in recent elections) and digital activism, as young people question whether any form of engagement can meaningfully address systemic challenges like unemployment, corruption, and economic inequality.

The proliferation of misinformation, propaganda, and manipulated content on social media platforms undermines the quality of political discourse and may discourage youth civic engagement by creating confusion, mistrust, and cynicism. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) distinguish between misinformation (false content shared without intent to harm), disinformation (deliberately false content intended to deceive), and malinformation (genuine content shared to cause harm), all of which circulate widely on social media and complicate civic engagement. Survey

respondents identified misinformation as a major concern, with 71% reporting frequent encounters with false or misleading political content and 55% stating that misinformation made them less certain about political issues and less confident in their ability to participate meaningfully in civic discussions. Qualitative interviews revealed that some young Tunisians had withdrawn from political discussions on social media due to the prevalence of inflammatory rhetoric, personal attacks, and coordinated disinformation campaigns that made engagement emotionally exhausting and intellectually frustrating.

Gender-specific barriers further limit inclusive civic engagement through social media, with young women in Tunisia facing additional challenges including online harassment, cultural restrictions, and gendered expectations about political participation. Sobieraj (2018) documents the "credibility discount" and harassment that women face in digital political spaces, which can deter their participation and silence their voices. Among surveyed female respondents, 23% reported facing gender-based restrictions from family or community members regarding social media use for political purposes, while 36% had experienced online harassment or threatening messages related to their political expression. These gendered barriers reflect broader societal inequalities and cultural norms that constrain women's political participation, demonstrating that technological access alone is insufficient for inclusive civic engagement without addressing underlying social and cultural obstacles. Several female interview participants described strategies for navigating these challenges, including using pseudonyms, limiting profile visibility, or focusing on "safer" topics like education or environmental issues rather than contentious political debates.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media platforms play a complex and significant role in strengthening youth civic engagement in post-revolutionary Tunisia, creating both unprecedented opportunities and persistent challenges for democratic participation. The findings reveal that Tunisian youth utilize social media as primary sources of political information, tools for mobilization and collective action, and channels for direct communication with government officials, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of civic engagement in ways that would have been impossible through traditional media and organizational structures. However, the democratic potential of these platforms remains constrained by substantial barriers including the digital divide, misinformation, political disillusionment, surveillance concerns, and gender-based restrictions that limit inclusive participation. While social media has democratized access to political information and expression, translating this access into sustained, meaningful civic engagement requires addressing structural inequalities, promoting digital literacy, protecting online freedoms, and rebuilding trust between young citizens and democratic institutions. The Tunisian experience suggests that social media should be understood not as a technological solution to democratic challenges but rather as

a contested space where the future of youth civic engagement will be negotiated through ongoing struggles over access, representation, accountability, and the fundamental question of whether digital participation can produce substantive political and social change. Future research should examine longitudinal patterns of social media-based civic engagement, comparative analyses across different Arab Spring contexts, and interventions designed to maximize social media's democratic potential while mitigating its risks for youth political participation.

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