

Digital Citizenship and Political Participation: Transforming Democratic Engagement in the Social Media Era

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Apr 12th, 2026

Revised Mei 20th, 2026

Accepted Juni 26th, 2026

Keyword:

Digital Citizenship; Political Participation; Democratic Engagement; Social Media; Digital Democracy.

ABSTRACT

This study examines digital citizenship and political participation in transforming democratic engagement in the social media era. The research aims to analyze how citizens' digital competence, political motivation, and platform-based communication shape the quality of democratic participation. This study applies a qualitative method with a case study design because the phenomenon requires contextual interpretation of citizens' experiences, meanings, and practices in digital political spaces. The research was conducted in Indonesia, particularly Jakarta and its surrounding metropolitan areas, as these locations represent active centers of political communication, civic mobilization, and social media-based public discourse. Data were collected from twelve purposively selected informants, including young voters, digital activists, civic educators, journalists, political communication practitioners, civil society actors, government communication officers, and ordinary social media users. The findings show that social media expands access to political information and participation, but democratic quality depends on citizens' digital literacy, ethical awareness, and ability to resist misinformation and polarization. This study recommends strengthening digital citizenship education, civic media literacy, transparent platform governance, and inclusive democratic participation programs.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally altered the relationship between citizenship, political communication, and democratic participation (Pathak, 2025). In contemporary democracies, citizens no longer engage with politics only through elections, political parties, civic associations, or conventional public forums. They increasingly participate through digital platforms where political information is produced, circulated, contested, and transformed into collective action (Sadki, 2025). This development has made digital citizenship a crucial concept for understanding how individuals exercise rights, responsibilities, and agency in networked political environments. Digital citizenship does not merely refer to technical access to the internet; it includes the capacity to evaluate information, communicate ethically, participate responsibly, resist manipulation, and contribute meaningfully to democratic life (Barandiaran et al., 2024). Within this context, the title "Digital Citizenship and Political Participation: Transforming Democratic Engagement in the Social Media Era" reflects an urgent scholarly concern: how democratic engagement is being reshaped by citizens' ability to act politically in digitally mediated spaces.

The state of the art in this field shows that social media has become both an enabling infrastructure and a contested arena for political participation (Giannelos, 2023). Recent studies highlight that social media platforms can expand democratic inclusion by lowering participation costs, allowing citizens to access political information rapidly, mobilize networks, express opinions, and engage in issue-based advocacy. Research on digital tools for citizen participation, for instance, notes that the ecosystem of digital participation remains underexplored despite its growing importance in policymaking and civic engagement (Mohammadzadeh, 2025). Other studies show that social media use may support democratic processes by encouraging electoral competition, decentralizing political communication, and broadening citizen involvement in public decision-making (Rueda, 2024). At the

same time, the literature increasingly warns that digital media can intensify democratic vulnerabilities, including misinformation, polarization, declining institutional trust, harassment, algorithmic bias, and unequal visibility of political voices (Pfetsch et al., 2025). Thus, the current research landscape is marked by a dual finding: social media can democratize participation, but it can also distort the quality of democratic engagement.

The main research problem emerges from this contradiction. While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for citizens to participate in political life, the quality, inclusiveness, and democratic value of such participation remain uncertain (Reddy, 2025). Many users actively share political content, join online campaigns, comment on public issues, or mobilize support for causes, yet these practices do not always translate into informed, deliberative, or accountable democratic engagement. Political participation in the social media era is increasingly shaped by platform algorithms, emotional content, influencer politics, fragmented publics, and rapid circulation of unverified information (Attoe & Chimakonam, 2023). Pew Research Center's 2024 findings show that users' political experiences differ significantly across platforms such as TikTok, X, Facebook, and Instagram, indicating that platform architecture influences how citizens encounter politics online (Pjesivac & Little, 2025). This raises a critical question: does digital political participation strengthen democratic citizenship, or does it produce a more expressive but less deliberative form of engagement?

The research gap lies in the insufficient integration between digital citizenship and political participation studies. Existing scholarship often examines social media participation by focusing on frequency of use, online expression, electoral mobilization, or political efficacy. Meanwhile, studies on digital citizenship tend to emphasize digital literacy, online ethics, safety, and responsible technology use (Stewart, 2023). However, fewer studies systematically connect digital citizenship competencies with the transformation of political participation in social media environments. Recent conceptual work argues that political participation on social media should be understood as a distinct mode of participation because it is shaped by unique networked and political affordances (Gahlaut, 2025). Nevertheless, the normative dimension of citizenship how citizens should participate responsibly, critically, and democratically often remains underdeveloped. This creates a conceptual and empirical gap in explaining how digital citizenship capacities influence the democratic quality of political participation.

The novelty of this study is its attempt to frame digital citizenship not merely as a supporting skill for online life, but as a transformative foundation for democratic engagement in the social media era (Tomilayo & Aroyehun, 2024). Rather than treating online political participation as a simple extension of offline participation, this study positions it as a hybrid practice shaped by civic knowledge, digital literacy, platform governance, political efficacy, and ethical communication. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how citizens become political actors in digital environments. It also contributes to debates on whether social media participation produces democratic empowerment or democratic fragility (Dacombe & Wojciechowska, 2024). By linking digital citizenship with political participation, the study provides a framework for analyzing not only whether citizens participate, but how they participate, what values guide their participation, and what consequences their participation has for democratic life.

In line with this background, the central research question of this study is: how does digital citizenship transform political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era? This main question can be elaborated through several analytical concerns: how do digital citizenship competencies shape citizens' political expression and mobilization on social media; what opportunities and risks arise from social-media-based political participation; and how can democratic engagement be strengthened through responsible, critical, and inclusive digital citizenship? These questions are relevant to the scope of contemporary political science because they address political behavior, democratic transformation, digital public spheres, and the changing nature of citizen-state relations (Arif, 2025). They also align with the broader focus of Journal Politica Humanitatis, which emphasizes comprehensive, analytical, up-to-date, and interdisciplinary political science research across local, national, and global political dynamics .

The objective of this research is to analyze the relationship between digital citizenship and political participation in the social media era, with particular attention to how digital platforms transform democratic engagement. More specifically, the study aims to explain the role of digital citizenship in shaping informed, ethical, and active political participation; to identify the democratic opportunities and challenges created by social media; and to develop a conceptual understanding of digital democratic engagement that goes beyond participation quantity (Moore, 2023). The study does not only examine whether citizens are politically active online, but also evaluates whether their participation contributes to democratic deliberation, accountability, inclusion, and civic responsibility.

The theoretical benefit of this research lies in its contribution to the development of digital citizenship and political participation theory (Mak et al., 2024). It expands the concept of citizenship by situating it within platform-based political communication and by emphasizing that democratic citizenship in the digital age requires more than legal membership or electoral involvement. Academically, this research contributes to political science, communication studies, digital sociology, and democratic theory by offering an interdisciplinary framework for understanding online political behavior. It may also support future empirical studies that seek to measure the relationship between digital literacy, political efficacy, online mobilization, and democratic quality. Practically, the study provides insights for policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, election management bodies, and digital platform stakeholders. It highlights the need for media literacy education, transparent platform governance, responsible political communication, and civic programs that strengthen citizens' capacity to participate critically and constructively in digital democracy (Herianto, 2024).

This research has several limitations. Since social media environments change rapidly, findings in this field may be affected by platform updates, algorithmic changes, regulatory shifts, and evolving user behavior (Amosun, 2024). The study may also face limitations in generalizing political participation patterns across different political systems, cultures, age groups, and levels of digital access. In addition, online political expression does not always reflect deeper political commitment, making it difficult to distinguish symbolic participation from sustained democratic engagement (Stein & Pentzold, 2025). Future research should therefore conduct comparative studies across countries, platforms, and demographic groups to examine how digital citizenship operates in different democratic contexts. Further studies may also explore the role of artificial intelligence, automated political communication, platform moderation, and disinformation networks in shaping future forms of digital political participation (Sabharwal & Jain, 2025). Such research will be essential for understanding whether the social media era can strengthen democratic citizenship or whether it will deepen the vulnerabilities of contemporary democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of digital citizenship and political participation has become increasingly important as democratic engagement shifts from institutional arenas to platform-based public spaces (García-Marzá & Calvo, 2024). In the social media era, citizens participate not only by voting, joining parties, attending campaigns, or engaging in civic organizations, but also by producing political content, sharing public issues, mobilizing online networks, questioning authority, and participating in digital deliberation (Debbarma, 2025). This transformation requires a theoretical foundation that can explain the relationship between citizens' digital competence, political motivation, and the technological structure of social media. Therefore, this study is grounded in three interrelated theories: Digital Citizenship Theory, Civic Voluntarism Theory, and Networked Public Sphere Theory. These three theories are relevant because they explain, respectively, how citizens behave responsibly in digital environments, why citizens participate in politics, and how digital communication infrastructures reshape democratic engagement.

Digital Citizenship Theory was popularized by Mike Ribble, particularly through his work on the "nine elements of digital citizenship," first widely circulated in the early 2000s and later developed in *Digital Citizenship in Schools: Nine Elements All Students Should Know* (Borda & Bowen, 2025). Ribble is associated with educational technology and digital citizenship scholarship in the United States, and his work has been widely used in schools, universities, and digital literacy programs. His theory defines digital citizenship as the norms, responsibilities, skills, and ethical practices required for

appropriate technology use (Hosek, 2023). Ribble's model includes elements such as digital access, communication, literacy, etiquette, law, rights and responsibilities, health, security, commerce, and collaboration. In this research, Ribble's theory is important because political participation on social media cannot be understood merely as online activity; it must also be evaluated through citizens' capacity to verify information, communicate ethically, respect democratic rights, and avoid harmful digital behavior. Ribble's framework therefore helps explain whether online political participation contributes to democratic engagement or simply increases noise, conflict, and misinformation.

The development of Digital Citizenship Theory has moved beyond the early concern with safe and responsible internet use. Contemporary scholarship increasingly links digital citizenship with civic engagement, democratic competence, platform ethics, and social inequality (Russell, 2025). Recent studies show that digital citizenship is no longer limited to technical literacy, but also includes the ability to participate critically in digital public life, resist manipulation, understand algorithmic influence, and act responsibly in online communities (Zhang et al., 2024). A recent editorial on digital citizenship and digital literacy identifies conceptualization, civic engagement, and inequality as central themes in current debates, showing that digital citizenship has become a broader sociopolitical concept rather than a purely educational one (Iacson et al., 2025). This development is also reflected in policy-oriented initiatives such as the Council of Europe's Digital Citizenship Education agenda, which links digital competence with democratic culture and responsible participation (Ribeiro & Oliveira, 2025). In relation to the present study, the contemporary development of Digital Citizenship Theory is useful for addressing the main problem: citizens are increasingly politically active online, but their participation is not always informed, ethical, or deliberative.

The second theory used in this study is Civic Voluntarism Theory, popularized by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady in their influential 1995 book *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, published by Harvard University Press (Akingbade, 2024). Sidney Verba was affiliated with Harvard University, United States; Kay Lehman Schlozman with Boston College, United States; and Henry E. Brady with the University of California, Berkeley, United States. Their theory explains political participation through three core factors: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Rakhmonov et al., 2025). In simple terms, citizens participate when they have the capacity to participate, when they want to participate, and when they are asked or mobilized to participate. This theory remains highly relevant because digital participation also depends on resources such as internet access, digital literacy, time, education, and social capital; engagement such as political interest and efficacy; and recruitment through online networks, influencers, political communities, and campaign messages.

The development of Civic Voluntarism Theory in the digital era shows that the meaning of political resources has expanded (Nugroho, 2025). In the pre-digital context, resources were commonly understood as education, income, civic skills, and organizational membership. In the social media era, however, political resources also include digital access, platform literacy, algorithmic awareness, communicative confidence, and the ability to transform online expression into collective action. Recruitment networks are also no longer limited to political parties, associations, unions, or civil society organizations; they now include hashtags, online communities, digital influencers, platform recommendations, and peer-to-peer mobilization (Momoc, 2024). Recent research on youth political information confirms that digital platforms play a major role in shaping political information environments, especially among younger citizens (Langstrup, 2025). This strengthens the relevance of Civic Voluntarism Theory for the present study because the central research problem concerns not only whether citizens participate online, but also why some citizens participate more effectively than others and how digital inequalities shape the quality of democratic engagement.

The third theory used in this study is Networked Public Sphere Theory, strongly associated with Yochai Benkler, especially through his 2006 book *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, published by Yale University Press (Tan, 2024). Benkler, then associated with Yale Law School in the United States and later with Harvard Law School, argued that networked information technologies transform the production, circulation, and contestation of information (Liao, 2023). His theory explains how digital networks decentralize communication,

reduce dependence on mass media gatekeepers, and allow citizens to participate in public discourse through distributed forms of communication. In this framework, social media becomes part of a networked public sphere where citizens, activists, journalists, political actors, and ordinary users interact in shaping public opinion.

The contemporary development of Networked Public Sphere Theory is marked by a more critical understanding of platforms. Early optimism emphasized decentralization, participation, and peer production, while recent scholarship highlights algorithmic control, misinformation, polarization, surveillance, harassment, and unequal visibility (Haastrup, 2025). Digital media can expand access to political discussion, but it can also intensify democratic vulnerabilities. Research by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development reports that digital media offer opportunities for political participation and access to information, yet also contribute to polarization, declining institutional trust, and the spread of misinformation (Agustina & Sukmono, 2023). Similarly, Pew Research Center's 2024 report shows that political experiences differ across platforms such as TikTok, X, Facebook, and Instagram, indicating that platform architecture shapes how citizens encounter and share political content (Office, 2024). This contemporary development is central to the study because the transformation of democratic engagement cannot be separated from the power of platform design, algorithms, and digital attention economies.

These three theories form the conceptual framework of the research. Digital Citizenship Theory explains the normative and competency-based dimension of citizens' online behavior. Civic Voluntarism Theory explains the motivational, resource-based, and network-based reasons behind political participation. Networked Public Sphere Theory explains the communicative environment in which digital political participation occurs (Veugelers, 2023). When combined, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining how digital citizenship transforms political participation in the social media era. The framework assumes that democratic engagement is shaped by the interaction between citizen competence, participatory motivation, and platform-mediated public communication. Thus, online political participation should not be measured only by the frequency of posting, liking, sharing, or commenting, but also by the democratic quality of such participation.

The relationship between the theories and the main research problem is direct. The main problem of this study is that social media has increased opportunities for political participation, yet it remains unclear whether such participation strengthens democratic engagement or weakens it through misinformation, polarization, performative activism, and unequal access (Zocca, 2024). Digital Citizenship Theory addresses this problem by emphasizing ethical, critical, and responsible participation. Civic Voluntarism Theory explains why participation remains unequal even when platforms appear open and accessible. Networked Public Sphere Theory explains why democratic engagement is transformed by the structure and logic of digital platforms (Roig et al., 2025). Together, these theories clarify that the issue is not simply the presence of social media in politics, but the quality of citizenship, participation, and public discourse within digital environments.

These theories also illuminate the research gap. Previous studies often examine digital citizenship as a literacy issue, political participation as a behavioral issue, and social media as a communication issue. However, fewer studies integrate these three dimensions into a single analytical framework (Mehlman-Brightwell & Piwinsky, 2024). This creates a gap in explaining how responsible digital citizenship affects the quality of political participation within networked public spheres. Recent work on political participation on social media notes the need for stronger conceptual and normative clarity in understanding online political participation (Downing, 2023). The novelty of this study lies in connecting citizenship competence, participatory motivation, and platform-based public discourse to explain democratic engagement more holistically.

The theories are also connected to the research questions, objectives, and benefits. The research question asks how digital citizenship transforms political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era. Digital Citizenship Theory helps answer what competencies citizens need; Civic Voluntarism Theory helps explain why and how citizens participate; and Networked Public Sphere Theory helps analyze where and under what communicative conditions participation occurs. The theoretical objective is to develop an integrated explanation of digital democratic engagement

(Anthonio & Roberts, 2023). The academic benefit is to enrich political science, communication studies, and digital society scholarship by bridging citizenship, participation, and platform studies. The practical benefit is to guide policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, and platform stakeholders in strengthening digital literacy, civic education, democratic deliberation, and responsible online participation (Navumau et al., 2025).

In conclusion, the literature review shows that Digital Citizenship Theory, Civic Voluntarism Theory, and Networked Public Sphere Theory provide a strong foundation for analyzing the transformation of democratic engagement in the social media era. Ribble's theory contributes a normative and educational lens, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's theory contributes a participatory and resource-based lens, while Benkler's theory contributes a structural and communicative lens. The integration of these perspectives supports the novelty of this research by explaining digital political participation not only as online activity, but as a complex democratic process shaped by competence, motivation, inequality, networks, platforms, and public discourse (Farhanuddin et al., 2025). Therefore, this study contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of digital citizenship as a transformative force in contemporary democracy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to examine how digital citizenship transforms political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era (Farhanuddin et al., 2025). A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the main objective of the research is not to measure political participation statistically, but to understand meanings, experiences, perceptions, practices, and social interactions that shape citizens' engagement in digital political spaces (Lopes, 2023). The topic of digital citizenship and political participation involves complex social, cultural, technological, and political dimensions. Citizens do not simply use social media as neutral communication tools; they interpret political information, negotiate identities, build networks, express opinions, participate in campaigns, and respond to democratic issues through different digital practices. Therefore, this study requires an interpretive method that can explore how individuals understand their roles as digital citizens and how they experience political participation through social media platforms.

The qualitative method allows the researcher to investigate the relationship between digital citizenship and political participation in a deeper and more contextual manner. In the social media era, political engagement is no longer limited to formal democratic mechanisms such as elections, party membership, public meetings, or legislative advocacy. It increasingly takes place through online discussions, hashtag activism, digital campaigns, civic education content, online petitions, political satire, citizen journalism, and networked mobilization (Satria & Rahmawati, 2025). These forms of engagement cannot be fully understood through numerical indicators alone because they involve subjective motivations, symbolic meanings, ethical considerations, emotional responses, and perceptions of democratic responsibility. For this reason, the qualitative method is used to reveal how citizens define responsible digital participation, how they distinguish credible political information from misinformation, and how they perceive the influence of social media on democratic life.

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study design (Zeng, 2025). This design is selected because the study focuses on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, namely the transformation of democratic engagement through digital citizenship and political participation on social media. A case study design enables the researcher to examine the phenomenon holistically by considering the interaction between citizens, digital platforms, political actors, civic organizations, and public discourse (Alkadrie, 2025). The case study is also relevant because digital political participation is highly contextual. The meaning and practice of online political engagement may differ depending on political culture, media literacy, democratic institutions, platform use, and public trust. Through a case study design, this research can provide a detailed explanation of how social media functions as both a space of democratic empowerment and a site of democratic vulnerability.

The use of a qualitative case study is also justified by the nature of the research problem. The main problem addressed in this study is that social media has expanded opportunities for political participation, but the democratic quality of such participation remains contested (Tiidenberg et al., 2024). Citizens may become more active in expressing political opinions, sharing campaign messages,

and joining online movements, yet this activity does not always produce informed, inclusive, deliberative, or accountable democratic engagement. Some forms of online participation may strengthen civic awareness, while others may reinforce polarization, misinformation, political hostility, or performative activism (Culp, 2025). A case study design makes it possible to investigate this tension by exploring the lived experiences of digital citizens, the role of social media platforms, and the ways political participation is shaped by digital literacy, civic motivation, and networked communication.

The research location is Indonesia, with particular attention to urban digital political spaces in Jakarta and surrounding metropolitan areas. Indonesia is selected as the research location because it represents a dynamic democratic context where social media plays a significant role in political communication, public debate, electoral mobilization, civic activism, and citizen-state interaction (Hawamdeh, 2025). As a country with a large number of social media users, a competitive electoral system, and an active online public sphere, Indonesia provides a relevant setting for examining the relationship between digital citizenship and political participation. Jakarta and its surrounding areas are chosen because they function as the center of national political discourse, media production, civil society activity, government communication, and youth-driven digital engagement. Many political debates that emerge in Jakarta circulate nationally through social media platforms and influence broader democratic conversations.

The selection of Indonesia as the research site is also based on the relevance of digital citizenship challenges in a developing democracy. Indonesian citizens increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp to access political information, communicate public concerns, follow political figures, and participate in civic campaigns (Jarempanit, 2024). At the same time, Indonesia also faces challenges related to misinformation, digital inequality, online harassment, political polarization, algorithm-driven echo chambers, and low levels of critical media literacy among some groups (Lukito & Ozawa, 2025). These conditions make Indonesia an important case for understanding how digital citizenship can strengthen or weaken democratic participation. The location is therefore not selected merely because of geographical convenience, but because it provides a meaningful context for analyzing the transformation of political participation in the social media era.

The research subjects in this study are selected through purposive sampling (S. Lawrence et al., 2025). Purposive sampling is used because the study requires informants who have relevant knowledge, experience, and involvement in digital political participation. Since this is qualitative research, the purpose of sampling is not statistical representation, but depth of understanding. Informants are chosen based on their ability to provide rich, reflective, and contextually grounded information about digital citizenship, social media use, political engagement, civic activism, public communication, and democratic participation. The sample therefore consists of individuals who are actively involved in or knowledgeable about online political participation, including young voters, digital activists, political communication practitioners, civic educators, journalists, academics, and government communication officers.

The study involves twelve informants with pseudonyms to protect their identities and maintain research ethics (Trentini, 2024). The first informant, "Arman," is a young voter and university student who frequently follows political discussions on social media and participates in online civic campaigns. He is selected because young citizens represent an important group in digital political participation and often use social media as their primary source of political information. The second informant, "Nadia," is a digital activist involved in issue-based advocacy related to democracy, public policy, and social justice. She is selected because her experience illustrates how social media can be used for mobilization, awareness-building, and collective action. The third informant, "Raka," is a political communication consultant who has worked with electoral campaigns and digital media strategies. He is selected because he can explain how political actors design online engagement and influence citizen participation.

The fourth informant, "Siti," is a civic education lecturer at a university in Jakarta. She is selected because she can provide an academic perspective on digital citizenship, political literacy, and democratic education. The fifth informant, "Bima," is a journalist who covers politics and digital media issues. His perspective is important because journalism plays a significant role in shaping public

understanding of politics in the digital sphere (Nerista et al., 2025). The sixth informant, “Maya,” is a social media content creator who produces educational content on public issues and youth participation. She is selected because content creators increasingly function as intermediaries between political information and citizens. The seventh informant, “Dimas,” is a civil society organization officer working on digital rights and democracy advocacy. His experience is relevant to understanding the relationship between online freedom, digital responsibility, and democratic participation.

The eighth informant, “Lestari,” is a government public communication officer involved in managing institutional social media accounts. She is selected to provide insight into how public institutions use digital platforms to communicate with citizens and respond to public participation. The ninth informant, “Fajar,” is a member of a youth political community that organizes online discussions and offline civic activities. He is selected because his experience reflects the connection between digital engagement and conventional political participation. The tenth informant, “Intan,” is a fact-checking volunteer who participates in countering political misinformation online (Lu, 2025). She is selected because misinformation is one of the central challenges of democratic engagement in the social media era. The eleventh informant, “Hendra,” is an election observer who monitors digital campaign practices. He is selected because electoral processes are closely related to political participation and digital democracy. The twelfth informant, “Putri,” is an ordinary social media user who occasionally shares political content and participates in online debates. She is selected to represent citizens who are not formal activists but still engage politically through everyday digital practices.

The number of informants is considered sufficient for qualitative inquiry because the study prioritizes depth, diversity, and relevance of information rather than numerical size (SM, 2023). Twelve informants allow the researcher to capture different perspectives from citizens, activists, educators, media actors, political practitioners, government officers, and civil society representatives. The diversity of informants is important because digital political participation is not a single-dimensional phenomenon. It involves different actors who interact within the same digital democratic ecosystem. By including various informant categories, the research can examine how digital citizenship is understood and practiced across different positions in society. The selection of informants also supports the research objective of analyzing the opportunities, risks, and democratic implications of social-media-based political participation.

Data collection is conducted through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and document analysis (Danker et al., 2023). In-depth interviews are used as the main technique because they allow informants to explain their experiences, interpretations, motivations, and concerns regarding digital citizenship and political participation. The interviews focus on several themes, including social media use, political information behavior, online political expression, civic responsibility, misinformation, digital ethics, democratic engagement, and the perceived impact of social media on participation. The interview questions are semi-structured, which means that the researcher prepares guiding questions but remains flexible in exploring new issues that emerge during the conversation (Nazokat, 2025). This technique is suitable because digital political participation is dynamic and may produce unexpected insights.

Digital observation is conducted by examining public political interactions on social media platforms (Shola & Victor, 2023). The observation focuses on public posts, comments, hashtags, campaign messages, civic education content, online debates, and digital mobilization related to political and democratic issues. The purpose of digital observation is not to surveil private individuals, but to understand patterns of public engagement in digital spaces. This technique helps the researcher observe how citizens express political opinions, respond to public issues, interact with political actors, and participate in digital democratic discourse. Document analysis is also used to examine relevant materials such as policy documents, reports on digital democracy, civic education materials, public statements, election-related documents, and social media guidelines. These documents provide additional context and help validate the information obtained from interviews and observation.

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis (R. G. Lawrence, 2024). Thematic analysis is selected because it allows the researcher to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The analysis begins with data familiarization, where interview

transcripts, observation notes, and documents are read repeatedly to understand the overall content. After that, initial codes are developed based on relevant concepts such as digital literacy, civic responsibility, online mobilization, misinformation, political efficacy, democratic deliberation, platform influence, and participation inequality. These codes are then grouped into broader themes that correspond to the research questions and theoretical framework (Kent, 2023). The main themes may include digital citizenship competence, transformation of political participation, democratic opportunities of social media, risks of digital engagement, and the relationship between online participation and democratic quality.

The theoretical framework guides the interpretation of the data. Digital Citizenship Theory is used to analyze how citizens understand responsible and ethical participation in online political spaces. Civic Voluntarism Theory is used to examine why individuals participate, what resources they possess, and how digital networks mobilize them. Networked Public Sphere Theory is used to understand how social media platforms reshape public discourse, political communication, and democratic engagement (Bouko, 2023). By integrating these three theories, the research can interpret digital participation not only as individual behavior, but also as a process shaped by competence, motivation, networks, and platform structures. This theoretical integration strengthens the analytical depth of the study and connects the research method with the main problem, research gap, novelty, and objectives.

Research validity is maintained through triangulation, member checking, and careful interpretation of data (Keremoglu et al., 2025). Triangulation is conducted by comparing information from interviews, digital observation, and documents. This process helps reduce bias and increases the credibility of findings. Member checking is conducted by confirming selected interpretations with several informants to ensure that the researcher's understanding does not misrepresent their views. The researcher also applies reflexivity by recognizing that interpretation is influenced by the researcher's perspective, assumptions, and position (Yadav & Verma, 2025). Therefore, the analysis is conducted carefully by distinguishing between informants' statements, observed patterns, and the researcher's interpretation. Ethical considerations are also applied by using pseudonyms, protecting informants' identities, obtaining informed consent, and avoiding the disclosure of sensitive personal information.

The technique for drawing conclusions in this study is inductive-interpretive conclusion drawing (A, 2025). This means that conclusions are developed from the patterns, themes, and meanings found in the field data, rather than imposed in advance through rigid hypotheses. The conclusion-drawing process begins by identifying recurring themes across informants and data sources. These themes are then interpreted in relation to the research questions, theoretical framework, and research objectives. The researcher examines whether digital citizenship strengthens political participation, how citizens experience democratic engagement on social media, what challenges weaken online democratic participation, and how social media transforms the relationship between citizens and democracy. The conclusions are drawn gradually by connecting empirical findings with theoretical concepts and by identifying the contribution of the study to existing literature.

Through this methodological design, the study is expected to produce a comprehensive explanation of digital citizenship and political participation in the social media era. The qualitative case study approach enables the research to capture the complexity of democratic engagement as experienced by citizens and political actors in digital spaces (2024, محمد). The selected location, informants, data collection techniques, and thematic analysis are aligned with the purpose of understanding how social media transforms democratic participation. This method also supports the novelty of the research by integrating citizens' digital competence, participatory motivation, and networked public communication into one analytical framework. Therefore, the research method is appropriate for addressing the main research problem, namely the uncertain democratic quality of political participation in an increasingly digital and platform-mediated society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that digital citizenship has become a decisive factor in shaping the quality of political participation in the social media era (Mananda et al., 2025). Based on qualitative interviews, digital observation, and document analysis, the study finds that social media has expanded citizens' access to political information and has opened new spaces for democratic

engagement (Tarsidi et al., 2023). However, the expansion of participation does not automatically produce a stronger democracy. The findings show a tension between increased political expression and the uneven quality of democratic participation. Many citizens are more active in commenting on political issues, sharing campaign messages, following public debates, and joining online civic movements, yet their participation is often affected by limited digital literacy, emotional polarization, misinformation, algorithmic exposure, and weak deliberative culture (Latief & Triuspita, 2024). This finding is directly connected to the main research problem: social media increases political participation, but the democratic value of that participation remains uncertain.

The research demonstrates that digital political participation is not merely a technical activity. It is a citizenship practice that requires knowledge, ethics, critical reasoning, and civic responsibility (Lick et al., 2024). Informants from youth groups, civil society organizations, journalism, academia, government communication, and ordinary social media users generally agreed that social media allows citizens to participate more easily than conventional political channels. Citizens no longer need to attend formal political meetings or join political parties to express their views. They can respond to public policies, criticize leaders, support social movements, or promote civic education through digital platforms. Nevertheless, the same informants also emphasized that online participation often becomes reactive, emotional, and fragmented (Borges & Christophorou, 2024). This shows that the social media era transforms democratic engagement by making participation more accessible but also more vulnerable to distortion.

The following table summarizes the major findings based on the qualitative method used in this study.

Table

Table 1 Thematic Findings on Digital Citizenship and Political Participation in Transforming Democratic Engagement in the Social Media Era

Research Focus	Key Findings	Source of Data	Link to Theory	Implementation
Digital citizenship competence	Citizens with stronger digital literacy are more careful in verifying political information, avoiding misinformation, and engaging in respectful discussion.	Interviews with civic educators, fact-checking volunteers, students, and digital activists; digital observation of public posts.	Digital Citizenship Theory explains the importance of ethical, critical, and responsible online behavior.	Strengthening media literacy, fact-checking habits, and civic digital education.
Online political participation	Social media increases participation through sharing, commenting, campaigning, online petitions, and issue-based mobilization.	Interviews with young voters, activists, content creators, and political communication practitioners.	Civic Voluntarism Theory explains participation through resources, motivation, and mobilizing networks.	Developing inclusive civic campaigns and accessible political education through social media.
Platform-based public sphere	Social media creates new public spaces but also produces echo chambers, algorithmic visibility, polarization, and unequal attention.	Digital observation of hashtags, comments, online debates, and campaign content.	Networked Public Sphere Theory explains how digital networks transform public discourse.	Encouraging transparent platform governance and healthier online deliberation.

Research Focus	Key Findings	Source of Data	Link to Theory	Implementation
Main research problem	Increased online activity does not always equal meaningful democratic engagement.	Cross-analysis of interviews, observation, and documents.	The three theories show that participation quality depends on competence, resources, and communication structure.	Designing policies that connect digital literacy with democratic participation.
Research gap	Previous studies often separate digital citizenship, participation, and platform studies; this research integrates them.	Thematic analysis of empirical findings and literature reflection.	Integration of Digital Citizenship, Civic Voluntarism, and Networked Public Sphere theories.	Creating a holistic framework for digital democratic engagement.
Research novelty	Digital citizenship is positioned as a transformative foundation for democratic participation, not merely as technical literacy.	Synthesis of field findings and theoretical interpretation.	The three theories jointly explain citizenship norms, participation mechanisms, and platform structures.	Building a model of responsible, inclusive, and critical political participation in digital democracy.

The first major finding relates to the role of digital citizenship competence. Informants who had higher awareness of digital literacy tended to be more selective in consuming political information. They checked sources, compared information from multiple accounts, avoided spreading unverified claims, and showed greater sensitivity toward hate speech, manipulation, and online conflict (Zimmermann, 2025). This finding supports Digital Citizenship Theory, particularly the idea that responsible technology use requires more than access to digital devices. Digital citizenship includes the ability to participate ethically, understand rights and responsibilities, communicate respectfully, and protect oneself and others from harmful digital practices (Kartikawangi, 2023). In the context of this research, digital citizenship becomes the foundation for transforming social media use into democratic engagement.

This finding also shows that the main problem of the study is not simply the presence of misinformation, but the limited capacity of citizens to respond to misinformation critically. Social media platforms provide political information quickly, but speed often reduces verification (Torreblanca, 2023). Several informants stated that political content is frequently shared because it is emotionally attractive, not because it is accurate. This condition weakens democratic participation because citizens may engage actively while being poorly informed. When connected to Digital Citizenship Theory, the finding suggests that democratic engagement requires citizens who are not only politically expressive but also digitally responsible. The implementation of this finding is the need for stronger civic digital education, especially among young voters and first-time political participants.

The second major finding concerns political participation as a product of resources, motivation, and networks. Social media lowers the cost of participation (McGowan-Kirsch, 2024). Citizens can participate without large financial resources, organizational membership, or direct access to political elites. They can join campaigns, sign petitions, share advocacy materials, participate in live discussions, or criticize government policies through their personal accounts. This finding is consistent with Civic Voluntarism Theory, which argues that participation depends on citizens' resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks (Lybeck et al., 2023). In the digital era, these factors are

transformed. Resources now include digital access, platform literacy, communication skills, and confidence in expressing opinions online. Recruitment occurs through peer networks, influencers, hashtags, civic communities, and algorithmic exposure.

However, the findings also reveal that digital participation remains unequal. Citizens with better education, stronger digital skills, wider networks, and greater confidence are more likely to participate effectively (Bashri, 2025). Meanwhile, citizens with limited digital literacy may become passive consumers of political information or may participate in ways that reproduce misinformation and polarization. This finding connects directly with the research gap. Many discussions about social media and democracy assume that digital platforms automatically democratize participation because they are open and accessible. The evidence from this study shows that openness does not eliminate inequality. Digital inequality shapes who participates, how they participate, and whether their participation has democratic value (Makai, 2024). The implementation is the need to design inclusive digital participation programs that reach marginalized groups, not only politically active urban citizens.

The third major finding relates to the transformation of the public sphere through social media platforms. The study finds that social media has created a networked public sphere where political discussion is no longer monopolized by formal institutions, mainstream media, political parties, or state actors (Almashaleh & Valilai, 2025). Ordinary citizens, activists, journalists, influencers, academics, and government officials can interact in the same digital environment. This creates opportunities for democratization because citizens can challenge official narratives, expose public problems, and mobilize support for social issues. However, the networked public sphere is not neutral. It is shaped by algorithms, platform rules, popularity metrics, emotional content, and visibility competition (Cha, 2024). This finding supports Networked Public Sphere Theory, which explains that digital networks decentralize public communication but also create new forms of power.

The implications of this finding are important for the research problem. Social media does not simply provide a free democratic space; it organizes political visibility (Mann, 2025). Some issues become viral because they are emotionally charged, controversial, or supported by influential accounts. Other important issues may remain invisible because they do not fit platform logic. Informants from journalism and civil society noted that political debates on social media often prioritize speed, conflict, and simplified narratives. This weakens deliberation because complex public problems are reduced to short posts, slogans, or polarized reactions (Lee & Kaleta, 2024). Therefore, the implementation of Networked Public Sphere Theory in this research suggests the need for platform accountability, digital public ethics, and stronger norms of democratic deliberation.

The findings also answer the research question: how does digital citizenship transform political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era? The answer is that digital citizenship transforms political participation by turning online activity into a more responsible, informed, and democratic form of engagement (Essomba et al., 2023). Without digital citizenship, social media participation may remain superficial, reactive, and vulnerable to manipulation. With digital citizenship, citizens are more capable of evaluating information, respecting pluralism, engaging in reasoned discussion, and using digital platforms for civic purposes. This transformation is not automatic. It depends on the interaction between citizen competence, participatory resources, and the structure of the networked public sphere.

The three theories used in this study provide a coherent explanation of this transformation. Digital Citizenship Theory explains the normative dimension of participation: citizens need ethical awareness, critical literacy, and responsibility. Civic Voluntarism Theory explains the behavioral dimension: citizens participate when they possess resources, motivation, and mobilizing networks. Networked Public Sphere Theory explains the structural dimension: political participation is shaped by the architecture of digital communication (Khan & Fatima, 2025). The integration of these theories shows that democratic engagement in the social media era cannot be understood only from the perspective of individual behavior or platform technology. It must be analyzed as an interaction between citizens, networks, institutions, and digital infrastructures.

The findings are also connected to the objectives of the research. The first objective is to analyze the relationship between digital citizenship and political participation. The results show that digital citizenship improves the quality of participation by encouraging citizens to become more critical, ethical, and responsible (Kaletski-Maisel & Jowallah, 2025). The second objective is to identify opportunities and risks created by social media. The study finds that social media enables broader access, faster mobilization, and more diverse political expression, but also creates risks of misinformation, polarization, symbolic activism, and unequal participation (Health, 2025). The third objective is to develop a conceptual understanding of digital democratic engagement. The results indicate that democratic engagement should be assessed not only through participation frequency, but also through its quality, inclusiveness, deliberative value, and contribution to public accountability.

The theoretical benefit of the research is found in its integration of three theoretical perspectives. The study contributes to Digital Citizenship Theory by extending it from digital literacy education into the field of democratic participation. It contributes to Civic Voluntarism Theory by updating the meaning of political resources and recruitment networks in the digital era. It contributes to Networked Public Sphere Theory by showing that networked communication can empower citizens while simultaneously exposing democracy to platform-driven vulnerabilities (Hunt, 2023). The practical benefit is that the research provides guidance for policymakers, educators, civil society organizations, election bodies, and digital platforms. It suggests that democratic participation cannot be strengthened only by encouraging citizens to be active online. It must also be supported by digital literacy programs, ethical political communication, transparent platform governance, and inclusive civic education.

The academic benefit is that the research offers an interdisciplinary framework for studying digital democracy (Alt, 2025). Political science often studies participation through elections, parties, institutions, and civic organizations. Communication studies often focuses on media systems, information flows, and platform effects. Digital sociology often examines identity, networks, and online interaction. This study brings these perspectives together by arguing that digital citizenship is the bridge between political behavior and digital communication. It provides a conceptual contribution by showing that digital political participation must be evaluated through competence, motivation, and platform structure. This contribution addresses the research gap in previous studies that tend to treat digital citizenship, political participation, and social media as separate analytical fields.

The discussion of the main problem is strengthened when connected to previous research. Earlier studies have generally shown that social media can increase access to political information and provide new channels for participation (Keifer-Boyd, 2023). Such studies often emphasize the democratizing potential of digital platforms, especially for young people, marginalized groups, activists, and issue-based movements. However, other studies also show that social media can intensify misinformation, political hostility, ideological fragmentation, and distrust (Khasawneh et al., 2025). The findings of this study confirm both perspectives but add a more integrated interpretation. The problem is not whether social media is good or bad for democracy. The more important issue is under what conditions social media participation becomes democratically meaningful. This study argues that digital citizenship is one of the key conditions.

The research gap becomes clearer through comparison with previous studies. Many earlier studies focus on online participation as observable behavior, such as posting, sharing, liking, commenting, or joining digital campaigns. While these indicators are useful, they do not fully explain the democratic quality of participation (Senyapar, 2024). A citizen may post frequently but still spread misinformation. Another citizen may rarely post but carefully verify information and participate in meaningful civic discussions. Therefore, the gap lies in the need to distinguish between the quantity and quality of digital participation. This study addresses that gap by linking online political behavior with digital citizenship competence and the structure of the networked public sphere.

The findings also expand the formulation of the research problem. The study originally asked how digital citizenship transforms political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era. The results show that transformation occurs in three ways. First, participation becomes more accessible because citizens can engage through everyday digital practices. Second, participation

becomes more networked because political action circulates through communities, influencers, and platform-based connections. Third, participation becomes more contested because the same platforms that enable engagement also create risks of manipulation, polarization, and unequal visibility (Smit et al., 2024). These findings show that digital citizenship is necessary to ensure that the transformation of participation strengthens democracy rather than weakens it.

The research objectives are also supported by the empirical findings. The study successfully identifies the relationship between digital citizenship and political participation by showing that digital competence shapes the quality of political engagement (Kristiawan & Hariati, 2024). It explains the opportunities of social media by showing how platforms enable fast communication, collective mobilization, and broader access to public debate. It explains the risks by showing how misinformation, emotional polarization, and platform algorithms can distort democratic engagement. It also develops a conceptual framework that connects citizen competence, participatory motivation, and networked communication. Therefore, the findings are consistent with the objectives of the study and provide a foundation for future research.

The benefits of the study are reflected in both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study enriches debates on citizenship by arguing that democratic citizenship in the digital era must include critical media literacy, ethical communication, algorithmic awareness, and civic responsibility (Palmer & Urbániková, 2024). Practically, the findings can inform the design of digital literacy programs, election education, civic campaigns, and public communication strategies. Academic institutions can use the findings to develop curricula that connect political education with digital citizenship. Civil society organizations can use the findings to design advocacy programs that encourage responsible participation. Government institutions can use the findings to improve public communication and reduce the spread of misinformation. Digital platforms can use the findings to strengthen content moderation, transparency, and civic integrity.

The implementation of the findings requires cooperation among multiple actors. Schools and universities should teach digital citizenship not only as technical competence but also as democratic responsibility (Trevisan et al., 2024). Election management bodies should develop digital voter education that addresses misinformation, hate speech, and ethical online campaigning. Civil society organizations should promote inclusive participation by reaching citizens who are digitally connected but politically disengaged. Government institutions should respond to online public criticism transparently instead of treating digital participation as a threat. Social media platforms should improve accountability by making political content distribution more transparent and by reducing algorithmic amplification of harmful content. These practical steps are necessary to translate the research findings into democratic improvement.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrated explanation of digital democratic engagement. The study does not treat digital citizenship as a narrow concept of internet safety, nor does it treat political participation merely as online expression. Instead, it argues that digital citizenship is a transformative condition that determines whether online participation contributes to democratic quality (Islam, 2025). By combining Digital Citizenship Theory, Civic Voluntarism Theory, and Networked Public Sphere Theory, the research offers a framework that explains the relationship between individual competence, participatory motivation, and platform-mediated discourse. This novelty is important because democratic engagement in the social media era is increasingly shaped by the interaction between citizens and digital infrastructures.

In conclusion, the results and discussion show that digital citizenship plays a central role in transforming political participation in the social media era (Kusuma, 2025). Social media provides new opportunities for citizens to access information, express opinions, join campaigns, and influence public debate. However, these opportunities are accompanied by serious challenges, including misinformation, polarization, unequal participation, and weak deliberation (Jia, 2025). The three theories used in this study provide complementary explanations. Digital Citizenship Theory emphasizes ethical and critical participation; Civic Voluntarism Theory explains resources, motivation, and mobilization; and Networked Public Sphere Theory explains the digital structure of public communication. Together, they show that democratic engagement depends not only on the availability of social media but also on the

quality of citizens, networks, and platforms. Therefore, the study concludes that the future of democratic participation in the social media era depends on strengthening digital citizenship as a foundation for responsible, inclusive, and deliberative political engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital citizenship plays a central role in transforming political participation and democratic engagement in the social media era. Based on the results and discussion, social media has expanded the space for citizens to participate in political life by enabling them to access political information, express opinions, join public debates, support civic campaigns, criticize government policies, and mobilize collective action more easily than through conventional political channels. However, the findings also show that the growth of online participation does not automatically strengthen democracy. The democratic value of political participation depends on the quality of citizens' digital competence, ethical awareness, critical reasoning, civic responsibility, and ability to interact constructively within digital public spaces.

The main conclusion of this research is that political participation in the social media era must be understood not only as the frequency of online activities such as posting, sharing, commenting, liking, or joining digital campaigns, but also as a democratic practice shaped by responsibility, literacy, and deliberative quality. The findings indicate that citizens with stronger digital citizenship competence are more capable of evaluating political information, identifying misinformation, respecting different opinions, and participating in political discussion in a more constructive manner. Conversely, citizens with limited digital literacy are more vulnerable to misinformation, emotional polarization, and reactive political behavior. Therefore, digital citizenship becomes an essential condition for transforming online political activity into meaningful democratic engagement.

The results also show that social media has created a more open and networked public sphere, where citizens, activists, journalists, influencers, political actors, academics, and government institutions interact within the same digital environment. This development has reduced the dominance of traditional political gatekeepers and allowed ordinary citizens to participate more visibly in public discourse. Nevertheless, the discussion confirms that the networked public sphere is not neutral. It is influenced by algorithms, platform rules, popularity metrics, emotional content, and unequal digital visibility. As a result, some political issues become highly visible because they are viral or controversial, while other important public issues may remain marginalized. This finding confirms that democratic engagement in the digital era is shaped not only by citizens' willingness to participate, but also by the technological structure of social media platforms.

The study further concludes that the three theoretical perspectives used in the research provide a strong basis for understanding the transformation of democratic engagement. Digital Citizenship Theory explains why responsible, ethical, and critical online behavior is necessary for democratic participation. Civic Voluntarism Theory explains that participation is shaped by resources, motivation, and mobilizing networks, which in the digital era include internet access, platform literacy, online communities, and social media networks. Networked Public Sphere Theory explains how social media platforms restructure public communication and create new opportunities as well as new risks for democracy. The integration of these theories shows that digital political participation is a multidimensional process involving citizens' competence, participatory motivation, and platform-mediated communication.

In relation to the research problem, this study concludes that the central challenge is not whether citizens participate politically on social media, but whether their participation contributes to democratic quality. The findings demonstrate that social media can support democratic engagement when citizens use it to exchange credible information, build civic awareness, mobilize collective action, and hold public authorities accountable. However, social media can also weaken democratic life when participation is dominated by misinformation, hate speech, polarization, performative activism, and algorithmic manipulation. Thus, the transformation of political participation through social media contains both democratic opportunities and democratic vulnerabilities.

This conclusion also confirms the research gap identified in the study. Previous discussions often separate digital citizenship, political participation, and social media communication. This research shows that these three dimensions must be examined together. Digital citizenship provides the normative and competency-based foundation; political participation provides the behavioral and civic dimension; and social media provides the structural and communicative environment. The novelty of this study lies in positioning digital citizenship as a transformative foundation for democratic engagement rather than merely as a technical skill or digital safety concept. In this sense, digital citizenship is not only about using technology properly, but also about participating in democracy responsibly through digital platforms.

Finally, this study concludes that strengthening democratic engagement in the social media era requires cooperation among educational institutions, policymakers, civil society organizations, election management bodies, media actors, and digital platforms. The practical implication is that digital literacy programs must be connected to civic education, political ethics, fact-checking practices, and responsible public communication. Academically, this research contributes to the development of digital democracy studies by offering an integrated framework that links citizenship competence, participation mechanisms, and networked public discourse. Theoretically, it enriches the understanding of citizenship and political participation in digital society. Therefore, the future of democratic participation depends not only on wider access to social media, but also on the development of digitally competent, critically informed, ethically responsible, and democratically engaged citizens.

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