

Motivating Political Engagement: How Self-Determination Theory Explains Young Adults' Political Activity on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how social media usage and motivational factors derived from Self-Determination Theory (SDT) influenced young adults' intentions to engage in online and offline political participation. A total of 188 young adults participated in an online survey assessing social media usage, motivational dimensions, and political engagement intentions. Descriptive, correlative, and hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. Social media usage significantly and positively predicted both online and offline engagement. When motivational factors were included, amotivation, introjected extrinsic, and identified extrinsic positively predicted online engagement, whereas external regulation showed a negative effect. The final models explained 52% of the variance in online engagement and 41% in offline engagement. The findings suggest that while social media provides an important platform for political learning and mobilization among young adults, sustained participation depends primarily on autonomous forms of motivation. Encouraging self-determined, value-based motivation may strengthen informed and enduring political participation among young adults.

KEYWORDS

social media, political participation, motivation, SDT, young adults

MOTIVATING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: HOW SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY EXPLAINS YOUNG ADULTS' POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a motivational theory that explains human motivation as shaped by both internal and external environments. SDT emphasizes that fulfilling psychological needs and supporting personal autonomy enhance people's overall well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Understanding the origin of motivation and why we act, move, and feel the way we do will advance the scientific study of decision-making and critical thinking.

There are three key types of motivation in SDT: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from internal interest, enjoyment, or satisfaction in the activity itself (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The action is its own reward. Motivation driven by external factors, however, is known as extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Within extrinsic motivation, there are varying degrees of internalization, including external regulation (acting for rewards or to avoid punishments), introjected regulation (acting to avoid guilt), identified regulation (acting because one values the outcome), and integrated regulation (acting because it aligns with one's identity). A lack of intention or motivation to act, often due to not valuing an activity, feeling incompetent, or believing the outcome is beyond one's control, is amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). For instance, someone who attends a political protest because of the cause is internally motivated, while someone who attends

to be with their friends is externally motivated. In this example, an amotivated person would not attend the protest at all, because they would believe their participation would not change anything.

SDT provides a useful theoretical framework for examining young adult political participation. Young adulthood is a critical developmental stage in which individuals experiment with identity and autonomy (Erikson, 1968). According to SDT, the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) is essential for fostering autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In a political context, these needs can translate into feeling that one's vote matters, having a genuine choice in political expression, and belonging to a civic community, respectively.

During this developmental period, political awareness often begins to emerge, yet political engagement is still inconsistent. A national poll conducted by the Institute of Politics (IOP) at Harvard Kennedy revealed that more than half (53%) of 18-to-29-year-olds nationwide said they would “definitely be voting” in the 2024 presidential election. However, youth voter turnout during the 2024 election decreased by 5 points compared to previous years (IOP at Harvard University, 2024). From an SDT perspective, this gap between intentions and behavior may reflect a lack of internalized motivation or the presence of amotivation. When young people feel politically powerless or perceive that their actions will not produce meaningful outcomes, they may experience threats to their sense of competence, which can lead to amotivation and disengagement. Conversely, when young adults perceive their political actions as effective or aligned with their personal values, they may be more likely to develop identified or intrinsic motivation, leading to sustained civic engagement.

The same poll from Harvard IOP stated that almost half of the youth who did vote listed “the desire to have an impact on the issues they care about” as one of their top motivating factors (2024). This finding aligns with SDT's concept of identified regulation, where individuals engage in behaviors because they personally value the outcomes. It highlights the importance of fostering a sense of autonomy and efficacy among young people to sustain their motivation for political participation. Research on youth within changing political environments, such as Hong Kong students reacting to Chinese sovereignty, also shows that broader contexts shape civic attitudes and willingness to participate (Kennedy, Li, & Ng, 2018). In this case, the politically contentious environment threatened young voters' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, but their internal motivation led to resistant civic engagement like protests, rather than amotivation.

Researchers need to consider the effects of latent engagement when studying youth political engagement, as well. Latent engagement is a type of political participation shown through continuous learning or exposure to political information, even if it is not coupled with political action (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). For example, taking a class on current events encourages students to engage with political material, even if it does not necessarily lead to participation in political activities, such as voting. This type of engagement can also be seen in online spaces, as people follow political pages, read news, or watch commentary without posting anything themselves.

As social media usage has grown exponentially in the last decade, politics and social media have become deeply intertwined. Social networking sites offer not only information but also a space for self-expression and identity building. Young adults depend heavily on external validation for social development, which can drive them toward sources of external validation (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). While some young adults use social media to express genuine political ideals, their need for external recognition could also bias their political behavior. By investigating the roles of social media usage and SDT-based motivational types, this study seeks to explain the factors that influence young adults' intentions to engage in both online and offline political participation.

The present study focuses specifically on South Korean young adults and examines intentions toward online and offline latent political engagement, rather than direct political action such as voting or protest participation. Using a cross-sectional survey design, this research aims to explore associations between social media usage and

motivational dimensions derived from SDT. The findings should therefore be interpreted within this specific demographic and contextual framework.

METHODS

Overview

This study employed a cross-sectional online survey design to investigate how social media usage and motivational factors grounded in SDT predict young adults' intentions for online and offline political engagement. The data were collected through an online panel service, which distributed the survey to eligible young adults in South Korea. After providing informed and voluntary consent, participants completed an anonymous Qualtrics questionnaire that contained four components: (1) measures of political engagement intentions, (2) social media usage frequency items, (3) SDT-based motivation items, and (4) demographic questions. The survey required approximately 10 minutes to complete. No personally identifiable information was collected, no sensitive topics were included, and all data were stored anonymously to ensure participant confidentiality and comfort. All analyses, including descriptive statistics, reliability tests, correlations, and hierarchical multiple regression, were conducted using Stata 18 to assess the relationships between social media use, SDT motivational dimensions, and political engagement intentions.

Recruitment and Procedure

Participants were recruited through a professional research firm that administers an online survey panel service. Data were collected using *GrowthPanel*, operated by GrowthHelper, which distributed the survey invitation to eligible young adult panel members residing in South Korea. The invitation included a brief description of the study and directed participants to the Qualtrics survey link.

Upon accessing the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent form detailing the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. Only individuals who provided informed and voluntary consent were able to proceed. No personally identifiable information (e.g., names, phone numbers, or identification numbers) was collected at any stage. The survey did not include sensitive or high-risk topics, and all responses were collected and stored anonymously on password-protected servers.

Demographic Information and Control Variables

In the survey, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information to describe the sample and to allow the inclusion of control variables in subsequent analyses. Respondents indicated their age as an open-ended numeric response, their gender by selecting from male, female, other, or prefer not to say, and their current college student status by responding yes or no.

Age was treated as a continuous variable in all analyses to account for developmental variation within the young adult population, as political awareness and engagement tendencies may shift across early adulthood.

Although multiple gender response options were available, all participants selected either male or female. The final sample consisted of 75% female and 25% male respondents. As a result, gender was analyzed as a binary variable. For regression analyses, gender was dummy-coded, with male serving as the reference category and female coded as the dummy variable. Given documented differences in political participation styles and engagement patterns across gender (Bode, 2017), gender was included as a control variable in all hierarchical regression models.

Similarly, student status was dummy-coded using non-students as the reference category and college students as the dummy variable, to account for potential differences in political exposure and civic engagement opportunities associated with educational environments.

These demographic variables were included in Step 1 of the hierarchical regression models to control for potential differences in political engagement intentions across age, gender, and student status before examining the effects of social media usage and motivational dimensions derived from self-determination theory.

Dependent Variables

Participants responded to political engagement intention items using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A total of eight items were adapted from Waeterloos, Walrave, and Ponnet (2021) to measure latent political engagement, representing both online and offline forms of political learning and exposure. Four items measured online latent engagement, such as: “I intend to read posts related to political causes.” The other four items assessed offline latent engagement, such as: “I intend to attend an in-person talk or seminar about a political issue.”

Independent Variables

Self-determination theory

Participants responded to items from Guay, Vallerand, and Blanchard’s *Situational/Contextual Motivation Scale* (2000) adapted to the context of political engagement on social media. Each statement was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A total of thirty-two items were used to measure eight motivational dimensions derived from SDT: *amotivation*, *external extrinsic*, *introjected extrinsic*, *identified extrinsic*, *integrated extrinsic*, *intrinsic to experience stimulation*, *intrinsic to know*, and *intrinsic towards accomplishment*.

Example items included “Although I do not see the benefit of what I am doing” (*amotivation*), “Because I want to be viewed more positively by certain people” (*external extrinsic*), “Because I would feel guilty for not doing them” (*introjected extrinsic*), “Because I choose to invest myself in what is important to me” (*identified extrinsic*), “Because it is really a part of who I am” (*integrated extrinsic*), “in order to feel pleasant emotions” (*intrinsic to experience stimulation*), “For the pleasure of acquiring new knowledge” (*Intrinsic to know*), and “for the pleasure I feel mastering what I am doing” (*intrinsic towards accomplishment*).

Social Media Usage Frequency

Participants responded to six items measuring the frequency of their social media activities. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). The items asked how often participants engage in various social media behaviors, including browsing content, posting or sharing their own content, liking or reacting to posts, commenting on others’ posts, joining or following groups and communities, and sending or receiving direct messages (DMs). Example items include “I join or follow groups or communities.”

A composite score was created by averaging the six items, with higher scores indicating more frequent use of social media for general engagement activities. This variable was included as an independent variable in the regression models to capture the degree of participants’ social media activity and its relationship with political engagement.

Descriptive, Correlation, and Regression Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata 18. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and the distribution of key study variables. Reliability analyses were performed to evaluate the internal consistency of each construct using Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α). To examine the relationships among key study variables, Pearson's correlation analyses were conducted. The analysis included both dependent variables: online political latent engagement and offline political latent engagement, and all independent variables, including social media usage frequency and motivational subscales derived from SDT: amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivations related to experience, knowledge, and accomplishment. Correlation coefficients, significance levels, and directionality were examined to assess preliminary associations and to confirm the absence of multicollinearity prior to regression analyses.

Finally, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effects of social media usage and motivational factors on participants' intentions for online and offline latent political engagement. Each regression was performed in three steps. Model 1 included demographic control variables (age group, gender, and student status). Model 2 added social media usage frequency to assess its unique contribution beyond demographic factors. Model 3 introduced the six SDT motivational subscales to test their additional explanatory power. Statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$ level.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

A total of 188 individuals participated in this study. Table 1 presents participants' demographic characteristics. Regarding gender distribution, females ($n = 141$, 75%) outnumbered males ($n = 47$, 25%). In terms of age, participants aged 20 or older ($n = 99$, 52.66%) were slightly more numerous than those 20 or under ($n = 89$, 47.34%). Participants were also asked about their student status, including enrollment in community colleges or four-year institutions. Among respondents, non-students ($n = 100$, 53.19%) accounted for a slightly larger proportion than students ($n = 88$, 46.81%).

Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses for all key variables are summarized in Table 2. All measurement scales demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .80 to .94, exceeding the recommended threshold of .80 (Nunnally, 1978).

Variable	<i>N</i>	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	47	25.0
Female	141	75.0
Age		
20 or under	89	47.34
20 or older	99	52.66
Student Status		
Student	88	46.81
Non-student	100	53.19

Note. Data collected by the author.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics ($N=188$)

Variables	No. of Items	α	M	SD	Min	Max
Dependent Variables						
Online Political Engagement	4	0.82	2.67	0.92	1	5
Offline Political Engagement	4	0.86	3.13	0.88	1	5
Independent Variables						
Social Media Usage Frequency	6	0.80	2.97	0.81	1	5
SDT Amotivation	4	0.88	2.40	0.92	1	5
SDT External extrinsic	4	0.88	2.23	0.98	1	5
SDT Introjected extrinsic	4	0.90	2.32	1.02	1	5
SDT Identified extrinsic	4	0.92	2.59	1.08	1	5
SDT Integrated extrinsic	4	0.90	2.69	1.07	1	5
SDT Intrinsic to experience stimulation	4	0.93	2.40	1.03	1	5
SDT Intrinsic to know	4	0.92	2.66	1.08	1	5
SDT Intrinsic towards accomplishment	4	0.94	2.57	1.12	1	5

Note. Data collected by the author.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Key Variables ($N=188$)

Pearson Correlation

All variables were significantly and positively correlated with dependent variables, except the correlation between offline political latent engagement and SDT external extrinsic. In other words, online political latent engagement was positively associated with social media usage and all motivational dimensions derived from SDT. Offline political latent engagement was positively correlated with social media usage and seven motivation dimensions (excluding SDT external extrinsic) derived from SDT. The correlation coefficients ranged from approximately $r = .26$ to $r = .61$, all significant at $p < .001$, excluding the correlation between offline engagement and external extrinsic. These results indicate meaningful but not excessive associations among the study variables. Importantly, all significant coefficients were below $.70$, suggesting that while the constructs were related, they were sufficiently distinct and did not present multicollinearity concerns for subsequent regression analyses.

Hierarchical Multiple Linear Regression Models: Predicting Online Political Engagement and Offline Political Engagement

Online Political Latent Engagement

Table 3 presents the results of three hierarchical regression models (Models 1–3) predicting online political latent engagement. Model 1, which included demographic variables (age group, gender, and student status), explained only 2% of the variance in online engagement and was not statistically significant ($F(3, 184) = 1.37, p = .25$). In Model 2, social media usage was added to the regression model. The inclusion of this variable significantly improved the model, explaining 14% of the variance in online political engagement ($\Delta R^2 = .12, F(4, 183) = 7.40, p < .001$). Among the predictors, social media usage ($\beta = .35, p < .001$) was a strong and significant positive

predictor, indicating that individuals who use social media more frequently for political or news-related content were more likely to engage in online political learning or exposure.

Model 3 introduced motivational factors based on SDT, including amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivations related to experience, knowledge, and accomplishment. This final model significantly improved the explained variance to 52% ($\Delta R^2 = .38$, $F(12, 175) = 16.01$, $p < .001$). In the final model, several SDT motivational dimensions emerged as significant predictors. *Identified extrinsic* ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$), *introjected extrinsic* ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$), and *amotivation* ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$) were positive predictors of online engagement, suggesting that participants who perceive online political activity as aligning with their personal values, internal obligations, or who lack clear external motives, respectively, tend to engage more. In contrast, *external extrinsic* ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$) was a negative predictor, indicating that individuals motivated primarily by external expectations were less likely to engage in online political activities. Additionally, student status ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$) emerged as a significant positive predictor in the final model, indicating that students were more likely than non-students to engage in online political learning and exposure after accounting for motivational factors and social media use. Collectively, Model 3 accounted for more than half of the total variance in online political engagement, highlighting the critical roles of both social media usage and autonomous motivation.

Offline Political Latent Engagement

Table 3 presents the results of three regression models (Models 4, 5, and 6) predicting offline political latent engagement. Model 4, which included only demographic variables, did not significantly predict offline engagement and accounted for just 1% of the variance ($F(3, 184) = 0.90$, $p = .44$). In Model 5, social media usage was added and significantly improved the model, explaining 9% of the variance in offline political engagement ($\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(4, 183) = 4.27$, $p = .003$). Social media usage ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) was a significant positive predictor, suggesting that participants who spent more time engaging with political or public content online were also more likely to exhibit intentions to engage in offline political activities.

Model 6 introduced the SDT motivational variables, further increasing the explained variance to 41% ($\Delta R^2 = .32$, $F(12, 175) = 9.97$, $p < .001$). Several motivation types were significant in this model. *Identified regulation* ($\beta = .35$, $p < .01$), *amotivation* ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$), and *intrinsic motivation to gain knowledge* ($\beta = .31$, $p < .05$) were positive predictors of offline engagement. In contrast, *external regulation* ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$) was a strong negative predictor, indicating that externally driven individuals were less likely to participate in offline political activities. Overall, Model 6 explained 41% of the variance in offline political engagement, underscoring the importance of intrinsic and identified motivations in shaping individuals' intentions to engage in in-person political learning or exposure activities.

Variables	Online Engagement			Offline Engagement		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Participants' characteristics	β	β	β	β	β	β
Age	-.14	-.16*	-.10	-.06	-.07	-.01
Female	.03	-.02	.04	-.04	-.07	-.03
Student	.16	.15	.13*	.13	.12	.09
Independent Variables						
Social Media Usage Frequency		.35***	.20**		.27***	.17*
SDT Amotivation			.19**			.24**
SDT External extrinsic			-.25**			-.47***
SDT Introjected extrinsic			.19*			.16

SDT Identified extrinsic			.35**			.25**
SDT Integrated extrinsic			-.02			.01
SDT Intrinsic to experience stimulation			-.02			-.07
SDT Intrinsic to know			.23			.31*
SDT Intrinsic towards accomplishment			.01			-.03
R ²	.02	.14	.52	.01	.09	.41
ΔR ²		.12*	.38***		.08*	.32***

Note. Data collected by the author. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 3. Results of Regression Models Predicting Online and Offline Political Engagement(N=188)

DISCUSSION

This study examined how social media usage and motivational factors based on SDT predict young adults' intentions to engage in online and offline political learning and exposure. The results demonstrated that social media use and SDT motivation jointly explain a substantial proportion of variance in political engagement, 52% for online engagement and 41% for offline engagement, indicating strong explanatory power.

In this study, social media usage was a consistent and significant predictor of both online and offline political engagement. Participants who reported more frequent engagement with social and political content on digital platforms were more likely to intend to participate in both digital and in-person political activities. This pattern suggests that social media may lower informational and psychological barriers to engagement by increasing exposure and normalizing political discourse within everyday digital interactions. These findings align with studies conducted in diverse contexts. Santos et al. (2025) found that among Portuguese youth, social media use and intention to use social media significantly predicted political participation. Similarly, Abdu, Mohamad, and Muda (2017) demonstrated that Facebook use among Nigerian youth was a significant positive predictor of online political involvement. Together with the present results, these studies suggest that social media may function as a mobilizing platform across diverse cultural contexts, providing informational and motivational pathways to political engagement.

When motivational factors were introduced, the model revealed clear distinctions among SDT dimensions. *Identified extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to gain knowledge* emerged as strong positive predictors of online political engagement, indicating that individuals who internalize political participation as personally meaningful or intellectually stimulating were more likely to engage in online political activities. In contrast, *external regulation* was a negative predictor, suggesting that individuals motivated primarily by external pressures or social expectations were less inclined to participate. These findings closely correspond with Ward et al. (2015), who found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influence political participation. Extrinsic drivers, such as social approval, predominate in online settings, while intrinsic motives better predict offline participation (Ward et al., 2015). In both studies, self-determined forms of motivation proved essential for sustained, meaningful engagement, while externally driven participation was less stable.

In addition, the consistency of these motivational predictors across both online and offline engagement suggests that motivational quality may operate similarly across digital and in-person contexts, rather than representing fundamentally distinct forms of political participation. These findings extend the application of SDT into the domain of digital political engagement by demonstrating that motivational quality, rather than mere exposure to political content, plays a central role in shaping engagement intentions. In contemporary media environments

where political information is widely accessible, the results suggest that the internalization of political values remains a critical determinant of participation.

Interestingly, amotivation was also a positive predictor in both online and offline contexts. This finding diverges from traditional SDT expectations, as amotivation is typically associated with disengagement. One possible explanation is that political engagement in digital environments may sometimes occur through incidental exposure or habitual consumption rather than deliberate intention. In highly algorithmic social media contexts, individuals may encounter political content passively, even if they report low perceived efficacy. Alternatively, some items in the amotivation scale, such as participating “even though it will not make a difference,” may reflect political skepticism rather than a complete absence of motivation. In contexts characterized by distrust or perceived inefficacy, individuals may continue to monitor political developments despite doubts about personal impact. This unexpected finding highlights the importance of contextualizing motivational constructs within digital political environments, where passive exposure and skeptical monitoring may complicate traditional distinctions between engagement and disengagement. Future research should further examine whether this pattern reflects measurement nuance, context-specific forms of engagement, or evolving expressions of political motivation in digital environments.

Student status was also a significant positive predictor of online engagement. This finding may reflect the role of educational institutions as structured environments that encourage political discourse and exposure, thereby reinforcing engagement intentions. Gender and age were included as control variables and did not show notable effects in the models.

Consistent with Kamau (2017), who found that social networking sites modestly enhanced Kenyan students’ political engagement without fundamentally transforming participation, the present findings suggest that social media operates primarily as a catalyst rather than a transformative mechanism. While digital exposure increases awareness and intention, enduring political participation depends on autonomous motivation. This interplay between social media mobilization and intrinsic engagement highlights the dual nature of digital political behavior: external cues may initiate action, but internalized values sustain it.

This study highlights that social media serves as an essential context for political learning and engagement among South Korean young adults. Still, its influence depends on the type of motivation driving participation. In line with SDT and prior findings from Portugal, Nigeria, Kenya, and other political contexts, autonomous forms of motivation (identified and intrinsic) were the most consistent predictors of both online and offline political engagement. In contrast, externally regulated or compliance-driven motives were associated with lower levels of engagement. These findings emphasize the importance of supporting self-determined, value-based motivation to promote informed and sustained political participation among young adults.

The findings carry both theoretical and societal implications. Theoretically, the results demonstrate that internally endorsed forms of motivation, particularly identified and intrinsic regulation, are more consistently associated with engagement intentions than externally regulated motives. This suggests that even in highly mediated digital environments, the internalization of political values remains central to participation. Digital exposure alone may increase awareness, but meaningful engagement appears to depend on whether individuals perceive political involvement as personally relevant and aligned with their values.

From a societal perspective, these findings imply that efforts to promote youth political engagement should focus less on external pressure or symbolic mobilization strategies and more on fostering value-based internalization. Educational institutions, civic organizations, and policymakers may benefit from creating environments that support autonomy, encourage critical reflection, and allow young adults to connect political issues to their own experiences and identities. Rather than relying on social approval cues, fear-based messaging, or performative participation campaigns, engagement initiatives may be more effective when they emphasize personal relevance, informed discussion, and voluntary commitment.

In digital contexts specifically, social media platforms and educators might consider designing interventions that promote deeper issue-based understanding rather than merely increasing content exposure. Supporting informational competence and reflective dialogue may strengthen internally motivated participation, which appears more stable than compliance-driven engagement.

Although self-determination theory provides the theoretical framework for this study, the analysis focuses specifically on motivational regulations along the SDT continuum, rather than directly measuring psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Therefore, the conclusions should be interpreted as applying to motivational orientations in political engagement, rather than as a comprehensive test of the full SDT model.

The present study is intentionally limited to examining self-reported intentions rather than actual political behavior, long-term participation outcomes, or causal relationships among the variables. It focuses on motivational orientations within a specific national and generational context (South Korean young adults) and does not differentiate among particular social media platforms or political ideologies. These boundaries should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size of 188 limits generalizability, and the study's reliance on self-reported measures of social media use restricts the precision of behavioral interpretation. The survey respondents were also predominantly female, which may have influenced the observed patterns of political engagement, given documented differences in political participation styles across genders (Bode, 2017). Although gender was included as a control variable in all hierarchical regression models, the uneven gender distribution limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should employ more gender-balanced sampling strategies to allow for a more comprehensive examination of potential gender differences in political engagement patterns. The definition of social media use in this study was broad, without differentiating among specific platforms or engagement types. Future research should also employ behavioral or longitudinal designs to capture platform-specific dynamics and to clarify causal relationships between motivation, exposure, and engagement. Additionally, while the sample included both students and non-students, broader demographic representation would enhance external validity. Specifically, expanding the sample to include older adults who rely more heavily on traditional news sources (Bergström, 2020) would clarify whether the observed relationships between social media usage and political engagement are generation-specific or apply across information ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how social media usage and motivational factors grounded in SDT jointly influence young adults' intentions to engage in political learning and participation both online and offline. Results showed that social media use significantly predicted engagement intentions, while autonomous forms of motivation (particularly identified extrinsic and intrinsic to gain knowledge) served as the strongest psychological drivers of meaningful participation. Conversely, externally regulated motivation suppressed engagement, underscoring the importance of internalized values and genuine interest in sustaining political involvement.

These findings carry important implications for educators, policymakers, and civic organizations seeking to promote youth political engagement. Rather than relying on external incentives or pressures such as mandatory participation requirements or social approval, efforts should focus on helping young adults connect political activities to their personal values and interests. Educational institutions can foster autonomous motivation by creating spaces for open political dialogue, encouraging critical thinking about issues that matter to students, and emphasizing the personal relevance of civic participation. Civic organizations and campaigns might similarly benefit from messaging that appeals to young adults' core values rather than employing guilt-based or socially coercive tactics.

More broadly, this research contributes to understanding how digital environments and psychological needs interact to shape democratic participation in an era of widespread social media use. With political information increasingly traveling through digital platforms, recognizing that motivational quality matters as much as exposure has important implications for democratic health. Supporting young adults' sense of autonomy and competence in political spaces may be essential for cultivating engaged, critically-minded citizens capable of navigating complex information and participating meaningfully in democratic processes.

Overall, these findings indicate that social media serves as an influential environment for political exposure and learning, but enduring engagement depends on self-determined motivation. Encouraging value-based, autonomous motivation among young adults, through education and open dialogue, may foster more informed and sustained political participation.

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