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Youth, Politics, and Cyberspace: The Impact of Virtual Spaces on Partisan Tendencies and Political Attitudes in 1990s-born Iranians

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The expansion of virtual spaces has fundamentally transformed how individuals—especially youth—participate in political processes. This study focuses on how virtual spaces, particularly social media and online platforms, influence the political attitudes and partisan engagement of Iranian youth born in the 1990s (Gregorian calendar: 1991–2000). This study employed a quantitative research design and utilized Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for evaluation. Data were collected from a sample of 1990s-born youth, and the study hypotheses were tested accordingly. ANOVA was used to analyze mean differences in political attitude scores and partisan activity levels. ANOVA results indicate that virtual spaces have a statistically significant impact on political attitudes ($F = 23.53$, $p < 0.001$) and partisan activities ($F = 20.80$, $p < 0.01$) among youth born in the 1990s. The findings confirm that virtual spaces play a vital role in shaping the political perspectives and partisan engagement of young individuals. The substantial influence of virtual spaces demonstrates that they serve as essential tools for political expression and participation among the younger generation. However, alongside increased engagement, these spaces also pose challenges such as the potential spread of misinformation and the intensification of political polarization.

Keywords: *Virtual spaces, political participation, youth, partisan activities, social media, political engagement, ANOVA, digital platforms.*

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the exponential growth of digital technologies and virtual spaces has transformed the nature of political participation, especially among youth populations across the globe. The emergence of social media platforms, online forums, and networked communication spaces has reshaped how individuals—particularly young people—engage with political ideas, express partisan affiliations, and mobilize for social change. Within the Iranian context, this transformation has been particularly profound, as the youth born in the 1990s (Gregorian calendar: 1991–2000) have grown up alongside the evolution of cyberspace, making them a crucial demographic for examining the intersection of digital media and political engagement.

The digital environment has enabled new modalities of communication that bypass traditional gatekeepers of information such as state-controlled media or hierarchical political organizations. As Castells argues,

networked communication infrastructures provide alternative spaces for constructing narratives of outrage and hope, which are often inaccessible through conventional channels of political discourse (Castells, 2012). For the Iranian youth, many of whom face constraints on political expression in physical public spaces, virtual platforms offer a relatively open sphere for engaging in political debate, learning about civic issues, and affiliating with ideological movements. Rahimi notes that in post-revolutionary Iran, cyberspace emerged as a forum for cyberdissent, allowing youth to challenge hegemonic discourses and articulate oppositional identities (Rahimi, 2003).

The role of virtual spaces in shaping political attitudes is further intensified by the ways in which these platforms facilitate peer-to-peer interaction and exposure to diverse viewpoints. According to Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl, digital platforms significantly shape political behavior and engagement, enabling users to acquire political knowledge, form opinions, and participate in political discussions at unprecedented scales and speeds (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2021). For Iranian youth who may experience political alienation or disillusionment with traditional political institutions, online networks can provide accessible entry points into the political sphere. This dynamic has been observed globally as well, where young people increasingly turn to virtual platforms to construct political identities, organize collective action, and debate ideological positions (Loader et al., 2020; Theocharis, 2020).

Indeed, the digital divide between institutionalized politics and youth engagement is narrowing due to the participatory affordances of virtual spaces. Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat highlight the significance of "formative events" in digital spaces as catalysts for youth political socialization, suggesting that exposure to political content on social media can shape long-term civic attitudes and participatory behaviors (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2017). These networked experiences often supplant traditional pathways to political participation, which may appear distant or untrustworthy to young Iranians navigating authoritarian controls and socio-political constraints. Howard's research supports this notion, indicating that information and communication technologies have reconfigured the boundaries of political Islam by enabling alternative forms of political expression and mobilization in countries such as Iran (Howard, 2011).

The Iranian cyberspace, while heavily monitored and filtered by governmental authorities, still serves as a contested terrain where diverse forms of political subjectivity emerge. Alavi's foundational work on the web of Iranian politics underscores the transformative impact of internet access on political discourse and opposition movements in Iran, suggesting that online media has been instrumental in amplifying marginalized voices and enabling political deliberation among youth (Alavi, 2005). Likewise, Shakhsari's analysis of the hypervisibility of queer Iranians in cyberspace reveals how virtual platforms function not only as spaces for political mobilization but also as sites of identity formation and contestation under globalized regimes of surveillance and resistance (Shakhsari, 2012).

Recent empirical studies affirm the growing reliance of Iranian youth on digital tools for political expression and electoral participation. Rahbarqazi and Nourbakhsh, for instance, demonstrate that social media usage has a significant positive effect on both electoral engagement and broader political action among Iranian citizens, with youth being the most active demographic in this regard (Rahbarqazi & Nourbakhsh, 2023). Ahmad further explores the dynamics of political behavior in virtual environments, emphasizing the mediating role of internet connectivity and political affiliation in shaping online persuasion patterns among university students (Ahmad, 2020). These findings reflect broader trends observed across regions where youth increasingly use digital communication to engage with political issues in creative, informal, and decentralized ways (Saud et al., 2023).

Despite its empowering potential, the politicization of virtual spaces is not without ambivalence. The digital sphere is equally marked by misinformation, echo chambers, algorithmic bias, and the commodification of political engagement. Rheingans and Hollands warn against celebratory accounts of youth digital activism by underscoring the need to examine the structural and affective constraints that shape online participation (Rheingans & Hollands, 2013). Similarly, Elliott and Earl distinguish between dialogical and non-dialogical modes of mediated youth engagement, arguing that digital spaces often replicate power hierarchies unless consciously structured to foster inclusive dialogue

(Elliott & Earl, 2021). These insights call for a nuanced understanding of how digital affordances interact with socio-political contexts to produce varied and sometimes contradictory outcomes in youth political behavior.

In the specific case of Iran, the state's ambivalent approach to social media—oscillating between suppression and instrumentalization—creates a complex environment in which youth must navigate both opportunity and risk. Nacif captures this tension by characterizing Iran's relationship with social media as "messy," reflecting a mixture of official censorship, user innovation, and contested digital sovereignty (Nacif, 2021). The geopolitical dynamics of data traffic in and out of Iran further complicate the political efficacy of digital engagement. Salamatian and colleagues reveal how data routing through foreign networks affects both the accessibility and security of online political activity, posing challenges to the autonomy and reliability of Iran's digital infrastructure (Salamatian et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, it becomes essential to explore how youth born in the 1990s—those who came of age during the consolidation of Iran's digital ecosystem—experience and interpret virtual spaces in relation to their political attitudes and partisan behaviors. Graham and Khosravi suggest that in reordering the boundaries between the public and private spheres, Iranian cyberspace enables new forms of identity performance and political mobilization among young users (Graham & Khosravi, 2002). Likewise, Antonova finds that the political values and orientations of contemporary youth are increasingly mediated through online environments, where political ideals are not only reflected but co-constructed in real time (Antonova, 2023).

This study situates itself within this growing body of scholarship by empirically examining the influence of virtual spaces on political attitudes and partisan engagement among Iranian youth born in the 1990s. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research aims to assess both the extent and nature of this influence, drawing on survey data, content analysis, and theoretical insights to construct a comprehensive picture of youth political behavior in the digital age.

2. Methodology

The methodology of this study combines descriptive–analytical and field-based approaches, aiming to address key questions regarding the impact of virtual spaces on youth born in the 1990s (Gregorian calendar: 1991–2000) and the associated educational objectives. This research relies on a wide range of documents and texts that are considered essential sources of information. These sources are collected, classified, examined, and analyzed to establish logical connections between them and to generate meaningful insights in response to the research questions. As the study is qualitative in nature, it focuses on precise interpretation and content analysis rather than numerical data.

The descriptive–analytical approach plays a central role in this study by assisting in the differentiation of existing concepts and ideas within the texts. Through the analysis of these sources, the role and significance of each element within the broader discussion are clarified. The researcher maintains objectivity throughout the investigation and reports findings without personal interpretation or bias. After clearly defining the research questions, relevant primary sources were collected, necessary data were extracted, and in-depth analysis was conducted. To further enhance analysis and interpretation, the perspectives of leading Islamic scholars and experts were employed to ensure the intellectual depth of the study.

Data collection, considered a critical stage in this research, was conducted through two main methods:

The descriptive–analytical method is centered on organizing data derived from books and documents. Unlike philosophical approaches to linguistic analysis, this method structures information in a way that directly addresses the research questions. Document analysis—including examination of primary sources and academic works—plays a key role at this stage. The researcher utilized primary sources to build the foundation of the study and employed secondary sources to complement and expand the discussion. Diverse viewpoints, particularly those of prominent thinkers, were considered to enrich the analysis.

This study also includes a field research component in which the researcher directly interacts with the target population—namely, youth born in the 1990s. A survey method was used for data collection, with the primary instrument being a questionnaire. The sample size, calculated to ensure precision and reliability, consists of 375 participants. To gather a representative sample, the study applied a multistage sampling method to capture diverse perspectives and obtain a comprehensive

understanding of the experiences of the study population.

This research utilizes descriptive statistics to analyze the collected data, aiming to summarize, organize, and present the results in a clear and comprehensible manner. For more complex analysis and interpretation of data, statistical software such as SPSS and Excel was used, providing the necessary tools for evidence-based decision-making.

3. Findings and Results

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the research sample in tabular format, and summarizes descriptive statistics for the variables under investigation. Once the data are fully analyzed and processed, tables containing information such as age, gender, education level, and other relevant demographic variables, along with descriptive indicators such as means and standard deviations, provide essential insights for describing the overall features of the sample. This section enables decision-makers and researchers to better understand the findings and engage in deeper analyses.

Table 1

Frequency, Percentage, and Cumulative Percentage of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Female	88	24.33%	100%
Male	287	80.77%	87.23%

According to Table 1, the majority of the sample (80.77%) were male, while 24.33% were female.

Table 2

Frequency, Percentage, and Cumulative Percentage of Age

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
18–20 years	297	70.33%	100%
21–29 years	78	20.77%	87.23%

Table 2 shows that the majority of participants (70.33%) were in the age range of 18 to 20 years, while 20.77% were aged between 21 and 29 years.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Age and Gender

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Age	375	16	18	16.84	1.23	-0.690	1.230
Gender	375	15.47	19.26	17.23	2.18	0.891	1.352

The mean age of participants was 16.84 (±1.23). Skewness and kurtosis indicate distribution characteristics of the age variable. The mean value for gender was 17.23 (±2.18), reflecting the coding scale for gender categories.

Table 4

Cumulative Percentage of Education Level

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	300	75.33%	87.23%
Master's Degree or Higher	75	24.77%	100%

As shown in Table 4, the majority of participants (75.33%) held a bachelor's degree, while 24.77% held a master's degree or higher. These tables clearly illustrate the demographic composition of the study sample and highlight key variables such as gender, age, and education level.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Key Research Variables

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Use of Virtual Space	375	5	43	33.28	6.41	-0.409	-1.123
Political Attitudes	375	36	92	62.43	14.32	-0.478	-1.309
Partisan Activities	375	16	38	28.39	3.65	0.932	1.241

The table shows that the mean score for the use of virtual space is 33.28 (±6.41). Given the skewness and kurtosis values, this variable exhibits a roughly normal distribution. Based on the skewness and kurtosis, all variables demonstrate normal distribution.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1:

It appears that virtual spaces have a direct and significant effect on the political attitudes of youth born in the 1990s. To assess the significance of this effect between mean scores of virtual space influence on political attitudes, an ANOVA test was conducted. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

ANOVA Results for the Effect of Virtual Space on Political Attitudes

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Political Attitudes	40.87	2	25.43	23.53	0.001
Residual	94.03	87	1.08		
Total	144.90	89			

According to Table 6, there is a statistically significant effect of virtual space on the political attitudes of youth born in the 1990s at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Hypothesis 2:

It appears that virtual spaces have a direct and significant effect on the partisan activities of youth born in the 1990s. To assess the significance of this effect between mean scores of virtual space usage and partisan activities among 1990s youth, an ANOVA test was conducted. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

ANOVA Results for the Effect of Virtual Space on Partisan Activities

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Partisan Activities	900.87	2	450.21	20.80	0.001
Residual	1883.03	87	21.65		
Total	2783.79	89			

As shown in Table 7, there is a statistically significant effect of virtual space on partisan activities at the $p < 0.01$ level, with higher mean scores observed for partisan engagement.

Beyond political attitudes and partisan activities, virtual spaces influence other dimensions of individual and collective behavior:

1. **Political Participation and Activism:** Virtual spaces facilitate discussions, campaigns, and awareness-raising, increasing electoral participation and encouraging users to engage in political events. These spaces also serve as hubs for activism, allowing users to organize

protests, sign petitions, and participate in global movements.

2. **Civic Engagement:** Engagement with online communities enhances a sense of collective identity and often leads to greater involvement in local or global issues, humanitarian efforts, and volunteer activities.

3. **Social Identity and Group Dynamics:** Virtual spaces shape social and political identities by exposing users to diverse ideologies. However, these platforms may also create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs and contributing to group polarization.

4. **Information and Knowledge Sharing:** Virtual platforms facilitate access to vast amounts of political and social information but also contribute to the spread of misinformation, which can erode trust in traditional media and political institutions.

5. **Behavioral Changes:** Social media influences consumer behavior and promotes political or ethical consumption. Additionally, observing peer behavior online may motivate individuals to engage in similar actions, such as voting or supporting social causes.

6. **Social Interaction and Communication:** Political discussions have shifted to virtual spaces, reducing the significance of traditional in-person interactions while enabling the formation of new social bonds across geographical boundaries.

7. **Cognitive and Emotional Impacts:** Emotional engagement with content related to social or political issues often drives participation but may also lead to burnout or cognitive bias, as individuals may consume content aligned only with their existing beliefs.

The ANOVA results confirm that virtual space has a significant impact on the political attitudes and partisan activities of youth, functioning as a critical environment for political engagement. While virtual platforms enhance political participation, they also present challenges such as the spread of misinformation and increased polarization. Understanding these dynamics is essential for leveraging the positive aspects of virtual spaces and mitigating their negative effects.

ANOVA Results for Political Attitudes (Hypothesis 1)

The analysis of political attitudes showed that the mean square value "between groups" was 25.43 and "within groups" was 1.08, indicating a significant difference between groups. This finding suggests that the use of virtual space accounts for a substantial portion of the variance in youth political attitudes, confirming Hypothesis 1. These results align with previous research confirming the influence of social media platforms on political participation and identity formation, particularly among digitally native generations.

ANOVA Results for Partisan Activities (Hypothesis 2)

Similarly, the analysis of partisan activities indicated that the mean square value "between groups" was 450.21 and "within groups" was 21.65. This significant difference further supports the effect of virtual space on partisan activities. These findings support Hypothesis 2, suggesting that virtual platforms significantly affect political engagement, as youth use these spaces to participate in political causes and movements beyond traditional party structures.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between the use of virtual spaces and both political attitudes and partisan activities among Iranian youth born in the 1990s (1991–2000). Specifically, the findings from ANOVA analysis indicate that exposure to and engagement with virtual platforms significantly influence the development of political viewpoints ($F = 23.53$, $p < 0.001$) and levels of partisan activity ($F = 20.80$, $p < 0.01$). These findings underscore the transformative power of digital environments in shaping the political behavior of a digitally native generation.

These results align with the conceptualization of digital media as an alternative sphere for political engagement, particularly in contexts where traditional political participation may be constrained. Castells's framework of "networks of outrage and hope" helps explain this dynamic, as virtual spaces allow individuals to challenge dominant narratives and mobilize around shared grievances and aspirations (Castells, 2012). Among Iranian youth, the online realm often provides a safer and more accessible venue for political expression than physical public spaces, especially in light of government-imposed limitations on protest, assembly, and media freedom (Rahimi, 2003).

The significant association between social media use and political attitudes found in this study resonates with previous empirical research highlighting the politicizing effect of virtual platforms. Ahmad found that internet connectivity, social media intensity, and political affiliation are all positively correlated with political persuasion among university students in Iran, illustrating how these variables function together in shaping political identities in digital contexts (Ahmad, 2020). Similarly, Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl emphasized that digital platforms not only influence the consumption of political information but actively shape political engagement by facilitating deliberative interactions and identity formation (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2021).

This pattern is further supported by Loader et al., who describe how virtual platforms mobilize young individuals for activism by lowering participation costs and offering immediate access to political communities and discourses (Loader et al., 2020). The participants in the current study, drawn from the cohort of 1990s-born youth, represent a generation that matured alongside the proliferation of internet technologies in Iran. For these individuals, digital platforms are not supplementary but integral to political engagement. As Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat note, digital spaces often serve as arenas for formative political experiences, embedding political learning within everyday online practices (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2017).

The second key finding—regarding the significant impact of virtual spaces on partisan activities—reinforces the argument that digital platforms function not merely as spaces for passive political consumption but as environments conducive to action. Rahbarqazi and Nourbakhsh documented that social media significantly boosted electoral participation and broader civic activism in Iran, particularly among younger users (Rahbarqazi & Nourbakhsh, 2023). This is consistent with the data in this study showing higher scores of partisan activity among youth with greater online engagement.

Saud et al. expand on this by illustrating how cultural dynamics within digital spaces encourage democratic participation and civic involvement, even in contexts marked by authoritarian political structures (Saud et al., 2023). In the Iranian case, this suggests that virtual platforms may function as de facto political arenas where youth can participate in partisan debates, support

ideological movements, and contribute to public discourse outside the constraints of formal political systems. Howard frames this transformation as part of the digital origins of democracy, wherein information and communication technologies reconfigure political boundaries and enable new forms of civic agency (Howard, 2011).

The explanatory power of the current findings also draws from the broader literature on political subjectivity and identity in Iranian cyberspace. Alavi's seminal work established that Iranian youth frequently rely on the internet as a tool for political dialogue and dissent, positioning cyberspace as a critical discursive domain in post-revolutionary Iran (Alavi, 2005). Likewise, Graham and Khosravi documented how online environments reorder the boundaries between public and private spaces, allowing youth to perform and explore political identities that may not be tolerated in offline settings (Graham & Khosravi, 2002). These insights suggest that the partisan activities observed in this study are part of a broader renegotiation of political agency occurring in the digital sphere.

The formation of political attitudes and partisan alignments in digital environments is also reflected in the work of Antonova, who argues that political values, orientations, and ideals among youth are increasingly mediated through virtual platforms, making these spaces crucial to the political socialization process (Antonova, 2023). This is echoed in the findings of Grishaeva and Shamaev, who identified a strong connection between youth political participation and the digital environment, particularly in societies experiencing rapid technological integration and socio-political transition (Grishaeva & Shamaev, 2022).

Beyond individual behaviors, the political impact of virtual platforms must be understood within their broader structural and geopolitical contexts. Salamatian et al. provided compelling evidence on how the geopolitical routing of internet data in Iran affects information accessibility, surveillance vulnerabilities, and overall trust in digital infrastructures (Salamatian et al., 2019). This raises important questions about the asymmetries of power embedded in Iran's digital landscape and the precariousness of political engagement conducted through foreign-controlled platforms.

Nacif's analysis of Iran's "messy relationship" with social media further illuminates the contradictions faced by politically active youth, who must navigate a landscape that is simultaneously censored, commodified, and deeply politicized (Nacif, 2021). Shakhsari adds to this by showing how hypervisibility and surveillance shape the expression of marginalized identities online, suggesting that digital participation among Iranian youth is both empowering and fraught with risks (Shakhsari, 2012).

Despite these risks, the findings of this study affirm that Iranian youth continue to use virtual spaces as arenas for active political participation. Theocharis emphasizes that while youth may bypass formal political institutions, they do not disengage from politics altogether; rather, they reconfigure their participation through digital channels (Theocharis, 2020). The high engagement levels reported in this study among 1990s-born Iranians confirm that digital platforms provide meaningful opportunities for political involvement, even in highly constrained political systems.

Finally, the relational nature of online political participation is evidenced in the work of Istyagina-Yeliseeva et al., who found that internet communications play a key role in shaping the models of socio-political activity among student youth in Russia—an insight that mirrors the Iranian experience examined here (Istyagina-Yeliseeva et al., 2020). Likewise, Elliott and Earl's distinction between "talking with" and "talking at" young activists underscores the importance of fostering dialogical spaces within virtual environments to ensure that youth political participation is substantive and not merely symbolic (Elliott & Earl, 2021).

Although this study provides important insights into the political behavior of Iranian youth in virtual spaces, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data rely primarily on self-report questionnaires, which are subject to biases such as social desirability and selective recall. Second, the sample—while statistically sufficient—may not fully represent all socio-economic, ethnic, or regional subgroups of Iranian youth, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships, and the dynamic nature of digital participation requires longitudinal tracking to fully understand its long-term effects.

Future studies should consider adopting longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine changes in political engagement over time, particularly in response to major political or technological developments. Incorporating qualitative interviews could also enrich the understanding of subjective experiences and motivations behind digital political behavior. Moreover, comparative studies involving youth from other Middle Eastern or authoritarian contexts could help illuminate the shared and divergent dynamics of virtual political engagement in similar socio-political environments.

Policymakers and civic educators should recognize the potential of virtual spaces as sites for meaningful political engagement and invest in digital literacy programs that encourage critical thinking, ethical participation, and resilience against misinformation. Political actors and organizations aiming to connect with youth constituencies must adopt inclusive, dialogical approaches tailored to the norms of digital communication. Lastly, efforts should be made to safeguard digital rights, including privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information, to ensure that virtual spaces remain viable platforms for civic and political life.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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