

Experts' Perspectives on the Role of Social Media in Shaping the Future of Political Participation in Iran: A Qualitative Futures Study

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This study aimed to explore experts' perspectives on the role of social media in shaping the future of political participation in Iran. This applied qualitative study employed a futures-oriented design based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts in communication sciences, political science, digital media, cyberspace governance, and political participation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, supplemented where necessary by snowball sampling, and interviews continued until informational saturation was achieved. The interview guide addressed the capacities of social media for political engagement, manifestations of online participation, governmental roles, platform effects, news restrictions, political discourse, elite formation, and the relationship between online and offline participation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. Open coding, constant comparison, category development, and higher-order theme construction were used to identify patterns, differences, uncertainties, and future-oriented relationships among the extracted concepts. The findings indicated that social media is likely to become an increasingly central infrastructure for political participation in Iran by expanding political awareness, bottom-up communication, public-opinion formation, networked mobilization, and indirect influence on governmental decisions. However, its political effectiveness was found to depend on public trust, media literacy, freedom of expression, platform credibility, governmental responsiveness, and the conversion of online engagement into consequential political action. Experts distinguished genuine participation from symbolic, supportive, or performative participation and emphasized voluntariness, plurality, and autonomy as its defining conditions. Governmental involvement was interpreted as potentially facilitative when based on transparency, dialogue, and infrastructure provision, but restrictive when associated with filtering, surveillance, censorship, or channelization. Social media was also found to facilitate elite identification and collective action, although political influence, visibility, and popularity were not considered equivalent to political competence. Online and offline participation were interpreted as interconnected dimensions of a single political process. Social media can strengthen the future of political participation in Iran, but its constructive influence will depend on institutional recognition, communicative freedom, public trust, responsible governance, and meaningful pathways connecting digital expression to political decision-making.

Keywords: Social media, political participation, cyberspace, futures studies, political communication, public opinion, Iran

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1. Introduction

Political participation is a foundational component of political development, democratic governance, governmental legitimacy, and the continuing relationship between citizens and political institutions. It encompasses a wide range of voluntary activities through which individuals and groups attempt to influence political decisions, public policies, the selection of political representatives, and the general direction of government. Conventional forms of political participation have historically included voting, membership in political parties, attendance at public meetings, participation in electoral campaigns, communication with public officials, involvement in civic organizations, and engagement in demonstrations or collective political action. However, the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed both the meaning and practical manifestations of political participation. Social media platforms have created communication environments in which citizens can receive and distribute political information, express political opinions, establish networks, participate in public discussions, support political causes, criticize policies, and mobilize others without necessarily entering traditional political institutions.

The transition from industrial society to network society has substantially altered the structure of political communication and the distribution of communicative power. In the network society, politics is increasingly conducted through interconnected communication networks rather than exclusively through centralized governmental institutions, political parties, and traditional mass media. Social actors can produce, circulate, and reinterpret political messages within decentralized digital networks, thereby influencing public agendas and collective perceptions. The networked organization of communication has also reduced the exclusive control historically exercised by professional media institutions over the production and dissemination of political information. Consequently, the boundaries between political communicators and political audiences have become less distinct, and ordinary users increasingly participate in the production of political narratives, interpretations, and counter-narratives (F. Majlesi, 2020).

Social media refers not merely to a collection of technological platforms but to an evolving communicative ecosystem that enables interactive, many-to-many, rapid, and relatively low-cost exchanges among users. Unlike traditional media, which generally operate through one-directional or institutionally controlled communication, social media platforms allow users to respond immediately, redistribute content, establish interpersonal and group networks, and participate in public communication as both consumers and producers. These characteristics create new possibilities for political participation by lowering the costs of political expression and enabling citizens to participate regardless of physical distance, organizational affiliation, or formal political status. Social networks may therefore expand the public sphere by providing spaces for political learning, debate, identity formation, mobilization, and the articulation of social demands (Andreeva, 2019).

The relationship between social media use and political participation has received extensive attention because digital platforms can affect citizens' political behavior through several direct and indirect mechanisms. Exposure to political information may increase awareness of public affairs, while interaction with politically active users may encourage discussion, strengthen political efficacy, and stimulate participation. Political discussion can help citizens interpret events, compare viewpoints, clarify preferences, and develop the confidence required to take political action. The citizen communication mediation model suggests that political news use can encourage political discussion and expressive communication, which may subsequently increase political participation across different national contexts (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2019). Thus, the participatory implications of social media are not limited to the passive reception of political content; they arise from the interaction between information exposure, interpersonal discussion, expressive behavior, and political action.

Political discussion is particularly important because it provides a mediating pathway between social media use and political participation. Users who encounter political content online may discuss it with friends, family members, colleagues, or members of digital communities, and such discussions may increase political knowledge, internal efficacy, and willingness to

participate. Research conducted in Iran has similarly indicated that the effects of social networks on political participation may be mediated by political discussion, political efficacy, and political culture (Rahbarghazi et al., 2017). This finding suggests that social media does not influence participation in a simple or uniform manner. Rather, its effects depend on whether online communication strengthens citizens' sense of political competence, encourages meaningful dialogue, and creates a culture supportive of active involvement in public affairs.

Political participation through social media may take multiple forms, ranging from relatively low-cost expressive actions to organized collective mobilization. Users may follow political accounts, share news, comment on public issues, sign online petitions, join political groups, use hashtags, participate in online campaigns, communicate with representatives, or encourage others to engage in political activities. Some of these actions remain entirely within the digital environment, whereas others connect online expression to offline participation, including voting, campaign work, demonstrations, or civic organization. The development of a validated social media political participation scale reflects the growing recognition that online political activities constitute a distinctive and measurable dimension of participation rather than merely an extension of general social media use (Waeterloos et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the boundaries of this concept remain contested because not every political reaction, expression, or interaction necessarily produces meaningful influence on political institutions or public decisions.

The distinction between symbolic expression and consequential political participation is especially significant. Clicking a reaction button, reposting a political message, or expressing dissatisfaction may indicate political interest, but such behaviors may not always involve sustained commitment, collective organization, or an intention to influence decision-making. At the same time, apparently low-cost actions can contribute to agenda-setting, visibility, identity formation, and the gradual development of political networks. Accordingly, social media participation should be understood as a continuum involving different degrees of intensity, organization, risk, and political consequence. Research on youth political participation

has also highlighted the conceptual diversity of participation and the need to distinguish among institutional, noninstitutional, expressive, civic, and digitally mediated forms of engagement (Weiss, 2020).

Young people are among the most prominent users of digital media and are therefore central to debates about the political effects of social networks. Digital platforms may provide young citizens with access to political information and participation opportunities that are less dependent on traditional party membership or formal civic organizations. A meta-analysis of research on young people and digital media found an overall positive association between digital media use and engagement, while also showing that effects vary according to the type of media use and form of participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). More recent evidence has suggested that social media can influence young voters both directly and indirectly through political orientations, including political interest, efficacy, and ideological engagement (Rehan et al., 2022). These findings indicate that social media may be particularly important for the political socialization of younger generations, although increased exposure does not inevitably produce informed, sustained, or institutionally effective participation.

The continuity of political social media use also depends on users' perceptions of usefulness, satisfaction, trust, and the capacity of platforms to meet political and communicative needs. Evidence from Arab countries has shown that continued use of social networking sites for political participation is shaped by users' evaluations of the platforms and their experiences of online political interaction (Chen et al., 2019). This is relevant to societies in which formal political channels are perceived as limited or insufficiently responsive. Under such conditions, citizens may turn to social media as alternative arenas for obtaining political information, expressing demands, and communicating with like-minded individuals. However, the political value of such platforms depends on whether users believe that participation is safe, credible, socially meaningful, and capable of producing some form of influence.

Social capital is another important factor explaining the relationship between social media and political participation. Online networks can generate bonding social capital among individuals with similar views and bridging social capital across socially or politically

diverse groups. Bonding networks may strengthen solidarity, commitment, and mobilization, while bridging networks may expose users to alternative perspectives and expand access to information. A study of citizens in Sanandaj demonstrated that different forms of social capital within social networks were associated with different forms of political participation (Ahmadi, 2019). These findings indicate that the political consequences of social media depend not only on the amount of use but also on the structure and quality of relationships formed within digital networks.

Exposure to diverse and opposing political viewpoints can produce both constructive and adverse outcomes. Cross-cutting exposure may broaden citizens' understanding, increase tolerance, and encourage deliberation by confronting users with opinions different from their own. Conversely, disagreement may generate conflict, uncertainty, withdrawal, or reluctance to express political views. A meta-analysis of cross-cutting exposure found that its effects on political participation are complex and contingent rather than uniformly positive or negative (Matthes et al., 2019). Social media platforms may facilitate diverse exposure, but algorithmic personalization, selective following, and network homogeneity can also produce echo chambers in which users repeatedly encounter politically similar content. Therefore, the architecture of platforms and users' communication practices jointly influence whether social media contributes to political dialogue, polarization, or disengagement.

Social media has also become a central infrastructure for political protest and collective action. Digital networks facilitate the rapid circulation of information, increase awareness of grievances, provide motivational cues, connect potential participants, and reduce coordination costs. Research has shown that social media can facilitate protest through the interaction of information, motivation, and network structures (Jost et al., 2018). Networked protest movements can emerge rapidly because digital platforms enable decentralized communication and allow individuals without formal organizational membership to become connected around shared issues. However, digitally enabled movements may also remain organizationally fragile because rapid mobilization does not necessarily produce leadership structures, strategic capacity, institutional continuity, or long-term political influence (Tufekci,

2017). This combination of mobilizing power and organizational fragility is critical for understanding how online political participation may shape future political developments.

The political implications of social media become even more complex in political environments characterized by restrictions on conventional media, limits on organized political competition, or strong governmental control over public communication. In such contexts, social media may create alternative publics in which citizens discuss political issues and circulate information outside official channels. Yet not all online publics operate under identical conditions, and the political consequences of digital communication vary according to the degree of openness, censorship, surveillance, and governmental responsiveness. Comparative research on authoritarian publics has emphasized the need to avoid treating all restricted political systems as homogeneous and to examine the different configurations through which public expression is permitted, constrained, or managed (Toepfl, 2020). Social media may therefore function simultaneously as a site of alternative political communication and as an arena subject to monitoring, manipulation, and control.

Governments and political actors increasingly recognize the capacity of social networks to influence public opinion and political behavior. Political models, narratives, symbols, and preferred interpretations can be disseminated through digital networks to shape users' attitudes and mobilize support (M. Majlesi, 2020). Official institutions may use social media to communicate policies, respond to citizens, promote political participation, and strengthen legitimacy. At the same time, organized political communication may be used to channel participation, marginalize critical perspectives, or create an appearance of public engagement without providing meaningful influence over decisions. The central issue is therefore not merely whether public officials are present on social media, but whether their presence creates reciprocal communication, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

Political participation is closely associated with political development because it provides mechanisms through which citizens articulate demands, influence elites, and contribute to the legitimacy and adaptability of political institutions. In the Iranian context, the relationship

between participation and development has been shaped by historical, institutional, cultural, and structural conditions (M. Sadat Hosseini, 2018). Political participation can support development when institutions permit the expression of diverse interests and incorporate public demands into policymaking. Conversely, participation may remain limited, symbolic, or unstable when citizens perceive that their actions have little effect on political outcomes. Futures-oriented analyses of political development in Iran have identified a range of inhibiting factors that may restrict institutional responsiveness, political openness, public trust, and the effective participation of social groups (Akhavan Kazemi & Nikounahad, 2019).

Within Iran, social networks have become increasingly important environments for political communication and participation. They allow users to exchange information, discuss elections, respond to governmental policies, follow political figures, and participate in campaigns or public controversies. Research among students at the University of Isfahan found a relationship between social network use and political participation, indicating that digital communication has become relevant to the political behavior of educated young citizens (Ebrahimi et al., 2019). Iranian research has also examined the role of virtual social networks in electoral participation, emphasizing their capacity to disseminate electoral information, influence political attitudes, and encourage engagement during election periods (Shams, 2020). These studies demonstrate the growing importance of digital platforms, but they do not fully explain how experts perceive their long-term influence on the future of participation.

A meta-analysis of political participation among social media users has similarly indicated that social media use is generally associated with political engagement, although the magnitude and direction of this relationship depend on contextual and methodological conditions (Khaniki & Khojir, 2018). The association between social networks and participation may be strengthened when users actively produce content, engage in political discussion, or connect online communication with offline action. In contrast, passive consumption, entertainment-oriented use, misinformation, and distrust may weaken the participatory potential of these networks. Consequently, the future role of social media in Iran cannot be inferred solely from rates of access or platform

use; it requires attention to the quality, purpose, and political context of digital engagement.

Social networks may also influence political culture by altering citizens' perceptions of authority, collective identity, efficacy, and acceptable political behavior. Through repeated exposure to political arguments and public reactions, users may develop new expectations concerning transparency, accountability, and participation. Social media can normalize criticism, facilitate the visibility of dissent, and allow citizens to compare official narratives with alternative interpretations. It can also reproduce political polarization, hostility, and distrust when communication becomes dominated by emotional narratives, disinformation, or antagonistic identity formation. The capacity of social networks to shape political culture is therefore multidirectional: they may support civic learning and participation, but they may also deepen social divisions and weaken the conditions required for deliberative engagement (Andreeva, 2019).

The concept of social media as an alternative public sphere is particularly important in relation to news circulation. When citizens perceive traditional media as insufficiently diverse, transparent, or credible, they may rely on digital networks for breaking news, political interpretation, and eyewitness accounts. This shift can reduce institutional control over information and increase the visibility of neglected concerns. However, it can also make citizens more vulnerable to unverified information, rumors, manipulated content, and competing versions of reality. The resulting information environment may increase participation by stimulating political interest, or reduce participation by generating confusion, cynicism, and distrust. Therefore, the political effects of social media depend significantly on media literacy and users' capacity to evaluate sources and interpret political messages.

Political participation through social media also raises questions about measurement. Conventional indicators such as voting, party membership, and attendance at political events are insufficient for capturing digital activities. Online participation may be assessed through behaviors such as producing political posts, commenting, sharing, joining political groups, participating in digital campaigns, and communicating with political authorities. However, behavioral frequency alone cannot establish whether participation is informed, voluntary,

influential, or connected to institutional outcomes. The development of specialized measurement instruments illustrates the need to distinguish political participation on social media from general platform engagement (Waeterloos et al., 2021). Qualitative inquiry is particularly valuable in this regard because it can explore how experts interpret the meaning, levels, boundaries, and future consequences of online participation.

The future of political participation in Iran will likely be shaped by interactions among technological innovation, platform governance, public trust, media literacy, political opportunity structures, demographic change, and governmental policy. Emerging technologies may increase the speed and personalization of political communication, while data analytics may allow both public institutions and political actors to monitor citizens' preferences more precisely. At the same time, filtering, restrictions, surveillance concerns, and declining trust may fragment the digital public sphere and drive citizens toward alternative platforms. The continuation of these trends may transform the balance between formal and informal participation, between institutional politics and networked action, and between online expression and offline mobilization.

Existing Iranian scholarship has introduced social networks as important environments for political participation and has examined their influence on elections, political culture, social capital, and youth engagement (S. M. Sadat Hosseini, 2018). However, a substantial need remains for a futures-oriented interpretation of how experts understand the long-term political capacities, risks, enabling conditions, and institutional consequences of social media. Such an interpretation should consider not only whether social media increases participation but also what kinds of participation it encourages, whether online engagement remains voluntary and meaningful, how governmental intervention affects public trust, and under what conditions digital expression can influence decisions and legislation.

Social media may strengthen participation by expanding access to information, facilitating public discussion, enabling network formation, increasing political efficacy, and supporting collective mobilization. Conversely, it may produce superficial engagement, polarization, misinformation, symbolic participation, surveillance, or

withdrawal. These contradictory possibilities indicate that the relationship between social media and political participation is neither technologically predetermined nor politically neutral. It is shaped by institutional choices, public culture, platform design, the distribution of communicative power, and the capacity of political systems to recognize and respond to citizen voices. Examining expert perspectives can therefore provide a deeper understanding of the drivers and uncertainties that may determine whether social media contributes to political inclusion and constructive reform or to fragmentation and political distrust.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to explore experts' perspectives on the role of social media in shaping the future of political participation in Iran.

2. Methodology

This study employed an applied qualitative research design with a futures-oriented approach to explore experts' perspectives on how social media may shape the future of political participation in Iran. The qualitative design was selected because the subject under investigation involves complex, context-dependent, and evolving social and political processes that cannot be adequately understood through predetermined variables or standardized measurements. The study therefore sought to identify expert interpretations, emerging trends, possible transformations, opportunities, risks, and future implications associated with the relationship between social media and political participation. A Delphi-informed expert inquiry was incorporated into the research process to facilitate the systematic elicitation, refinement, and organization of informed judgments concerning the future development of this phenomenon. This approach was particularly appropriate because futures-oriented questions require the integration of specialized knowledge, professional experience, and reflective judgments from individuals who possess direct familiarity with political communication, digital media, public participation, and the sociopolitical context of Iran.

The study population consisted of experts in communication sciences, political science, political sociology, digital media, cyberspace governance, and political participation, as well as political analysts, researchers, media professionals, and experienced activists working in online political environments.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the aim was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to obtain information-rich accounts from individuals with relevant expertise and practical knowledge. Where necessary, snowball sampling was also used to identify additional experts whose professional or scholarly experience closely corresponded to the research topic. The initial sampling framework included 30 recognized experts, although the adequacy of the final sample was determined by theoretical and informational saturation. Interviews continued until the addition of new participants no longer generated substantially new concepts, interpretations, future trends, or explanatory insights related to the research questions.

Eligibility for participation was based on several criteria. Participants were required to have active familiarity with at least one social media platform or online messaging service, demonstrable knowledge of political participation and digital communication, and relevant academic, professional, policymaking, analytical, or practical experience. Preference was given to individuals who had published scholarly articles or books, conducted research, participated in policy analysis, managed media-related activities, or were recognized as knowledgeable commentators in the fields of social media, political communication, public opinion, digital activism, or political participation. The selection process also sought diversity in disciplinary background, professional position, and type of engagement with social media in order to capture a broad range of perspectives. This diversity enabled the study to examine the phenomenon from academic, political, technological, communicative, social, and practical viewpoints.

Participants were contacted individually and were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of audio recording, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. In accordance with the principles of expert inquiry, the identities of participants were protected throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Their statements were not attributed to identifiable individuals, institutions, or political affiliations. Instead, coded identifiers were used when presenting excerpts from the interviews. Maintaining anonymity was especially

important because the study addressed political participation, digital activism, and the potential political consequences of social media use within the Iranian context.

Data were collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the selected experts. A researcher-developed interview guide was designed on the basis of the study objectives, the conceptual relationship between social media and political participation, and the requirements of futures-oriented qualitative inquiry. The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency across interviews while allowing participants to explain their experiences, judgments, and expectations in detail. The interview guide contained open-ended questions concerning the present role of social media in political participation, emerging patterns of online political engagement, changes in citizens' access to political information, the formation of political attitudes and identities, digital mobilization, electoral participation, protest behavior, communication between citizens and political institutions, and the influence of online networks on collective action. Additional questions explored the opportunities and threats associated with social media, including political awareness, inclusion of marginalized voices, misinformation, polarization, surveillance, manipulation, declining institutional trust, and the possible transformation of conventional forms of political participation.

Because the study was futures-oriented, participants were also asked to identify key drivers of change, emerging uncertainties, possible discontinuities, and plausible future developments. They were encouraged to reflect on how technological innovation, platform governance, government regulation, demographic change, media literacy, political trust, artificial intelligence, data-driven political communication, and shifts in public behavior might affect political participation in Iran. Probing questions were used to clarify participants' meanings, obtain concrete examples, explore causal relationships, and distinguish between current observations and future expectations. The interviewer used prompts such as "Could you explain this further?", "What factors may lead to this development?", "What consequences might this have for political participation?", and "Under what conditions would this future become more likely?" Such probes

helped generate detailed narratives and reduced the likelihood of superficial or overly general responses.

Before formal data collection, the interview guide was reviewed by specialists in qualitative research, communication studies, political science, and futures studies. Their comments were used to improve the clarity, relevance, sequencing, and comprehensiveness of the questions. A small number of preliminary interviews were also conducted to assess whether the questions elicited sufficiently detailed information and whether any items were ambiguous, repetitive, or politically sensitive. Based on this preliminary assessment, the wording and order of several questions were refined. The final interview guide remained flexible throughout data collection so that concepts emerging from earlier interviews could be explored in greater depth during subsequent interviews.

Interviews were conducted individually in a setting or online environment that ensured privacy and encouraged open discussion. Depending on participants' availability and location, interviews were held either face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The researcher also prepared field notes during and immediately after each interview to document contextual information, nonverbal observations, emerging analytical ideas, and issues requiring further exploration. These notes were used to complement the interview transcripts and support the interpretation of participants' statements within their social, professional, and political contexts.

The data collection process followed an iterative and Delphi-informed logic. After the initial interviews had been completed, the responses were reviewed and organized into preliminary themes, future trends, opportunities, threats, and areas of disagreement. A synthesized summary of the emerging findings was then prepared without revealing the identity of any participant. Where clarification or refinement was required, participants were invited to reconsider selected issues, comment on the preliminary interpretations, or evaluate the relative importance and plausibility of the identified future developments. This controlled feedback process enabled the researcher to refine ambiguous concepts, examine areas of

convergence and divergence, and distinguish broadly shared judgments from more contested viewpoints. The purpose of this process was not to force complete consensus, but to develop a more systematic and transparent account of expert perspectives concerning the future relationship between social media and political participation in Iran.

The interview data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. This method was selected because it enables the researcher to identify patterns of meaning across participants' accounts while remaining attentive to the political, social, technological, and cultural context in which those accounts are produced. Interpretation focused not only on the explicit content of the interviews but also on the assumptions, causal explanations, future expectations, uncertainties, and normative judgments embedded in the experts' statements. In this study, the relevant text consisted of the written transcripts of participants' spoken accounts, while the contextual dimension included Iran's political environment, the structure of the media system, technological developments, platform-related conditions, regulatory arrangements, and changing forms of citizen participation.

Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve immersion in the data and develop a comprehensive understanding of each participant's perspective. Audio recordings were reviewed alongside the transcripts to ensure transcription accuracy and preserve the intended meaning of participants' statements. During the initial coding stage, meaningful words, sentences, and passages related to the role of social media, forms of political participation, mechanisms of influence, future drivers, opportunities, threats, uncertainties, and anticipated consequences were identified. Each relevant segment was assigned a concise code that reflected its central meaning. Coding remained open and inductive so that concepts could emerge from the participants' accounts rather than being restricted to predetermined theoretical categories.

In the next stage, conceptually similar codes were compared, merged, differentiated, and organized into broader categories. Constant comparison was used throughout the analytical process to examine similarities and differences between participants, disciplines, and professional backgrounds. Particular attention was paid to recurring patterns, contradictory views, minority

perspectives, conditional statements, and issues on which expert judgments remained uncertain. Categories were then developed into higher-order themes representing the principal dimensions of the future relationship between social media and political participation. These themes were expected to encompass issues such as digital political awareness, networked mobilization, transformation of political communication, new forms of civic engagement, personalization of political content, political polarization, erosion or reconstruction of trust, platform governance, regulatory intervention, surveillance, misinformation, and the reconfiguration of relations between citizens and political institutions.

A futures-oriented interpretive lens was applied during theme development. Statements referring to anticipated developments were examined in relation to their underlying drivers, enabling conditions, barriers, uncertainties, and possible consequences. The analysis distinguished between current trends, emerging signals, plausible future developments, and highly uncertain possibilities. Where participants described different possible directions, these perspectives were retained as alternative future pathways rather than being reduced to a single prediction. The researcher also examined how technological, political, cultural, demographic, and institutional factors might interact to strengthen or weaken the influence of social media on political participation. This approach enabled the findings to move beyond a descriptive account of existing social media use and toward an interpretive explanation of how different futures of political participation may emerge.

The analysis proceeded iteratively alongside data collection. Preliminary coding of early interviews informed the questions and probes used in later interviews, allowing underdeveloped concepts to be explored more deeply. Data collection and analysis continued until informational saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews no longer produced substantively new themes, mechanisms, or future-oriented categories. The final thematic structure was reviewed repeatedly to ensure that each theme was internally coherent, conceptually distinct, and supported by sufficient evidence from the interview data.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was

strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, purposive selection of knowledgeable participants, iterative interviewing, peer review of the coding process, and participant feedback on preliminary interpretations. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail containing interview guides, transcripts, coding decisions, category revisions, analytical notes, and records of theme development. Confirmability was promoted through reflexive note-taking and the systematic comparison of interpretations with the original interview material. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the study context, participant characteristics, sampling criteria, data collection procedures, and analytical process, thereby enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other contexts.

Where appropriate, qualitative data management software was used to organize transcripts, codes, categories, and thematic relationships. The software served only as a tool for managing and retrieving the data; interpretation remained the responsibility of the researcher. Conceptual mapping and network-based analysis were also used to visualize relationships among drivers, mediating conditions, emerging trends, and anticipated consequences. These analytical maps helped clarify how technological developments, political trust, regulatory policies, media literacy, platform structures, and citizen behavior might jointly shape future patterns of political participation in Iran. The final interpretation was developed by integrating the thematic findings, expert feedback, contextual analysis, and futures-oriented relationships identified throughout the research process.

3. Findings and Results

The analysis of the expert interviews produced a broad set of interconnected findings concerning the capacity of social media to shape the future of political participation in Iran. The findings demonstrated that social media is perceived simultaneously as an enabling infrastructure for political awareness, communication, mobilization, public-opinion formation, and bottom-up influence, and as a potentially destabilizing environment characterized by misinformation, polarization, surveillance, channelization, symbolic participation, and declining public trust. Experts emphasized that the future political effects of social media would depend not merely on

technological access, but also on political openness, media literacy, platform credibility, freedom of expression, governmental responsiveness, the voluntary nature of participation, and the extent to which online

engagement is translated into meaningful political action. Table 1 presents the complete set of factors extracted from the experts' responses.

Table 1

Complete Qualitative Findings Extracted from Experts' Responses

Component	Interview Question	Factors Identified from Experts' Responses
Capacity of cyberspace and social media to develop political participation	Considering the capacities of cyberspace, should citizens' political participation in this environment move toward influencing governmental decisions and producing changes in legislation? Can its position and level be measured?	1. Failure to achieve tangible outcomes. 2. Coercive and rigid governmental confrontation. 3. Loss of opportunities for constructive and affirmative use. 4. Conscious governance interaction through content production and respectful indirect communication with society. 5. Recognized actors who possess public trust can assist the government in this process. 6. Cyberspace actors can function as a communicative bridge between the state and the nation. 7. The level of political participation in cyberspace can be measured through the number of views received by political posts. 8. Citizens' online political participation should be directed toward influencing governmental decision-making. 9. Difficulty in transforming public political participation into a direct source of legislation. 10. Indirect influence on governmental decisions through the expression of citizens' concerns and needs. 11. Cyberspace provides only a relative possibility for influence. 12. Depriving society and government of cyberspace causes social damage. 13. Both qualitative and quantitative measurement of participation is possible. 14. Political communication constitutes an important category of communication. 15. Political communication involves media-based action intended to influence, and be influenced by, governmental behavior. 16. Citizens' behavior in cyberspace inevitably influences and is influenced by political communication. 17. The level of influence can be assessed through the dominant culture of society and the government's prevailing approach toward cyberspace. 18. In the future, cyberspace will become the dominant arena of political participation. 19. The position and level of participation can be measured according to citizens' knowledge of existing communication technologies. 20. Media activities directly influence the balance of political and social power. 21. Changes in the balance of power influence the decisions of governmental actors. 22. Cyberspace creates a bottom-up channel of communication. 23. Monitoring and refining public demands can increase the penetration of legitimate demands. 24. Political participation in cyberspace is necessary for influencing governmental decisions. 25. Political success requires public participation in cyberspace. 26. Citizens act as active political agents capable of influencing others. 27. Opinion formation and public enlightenment are among citizens' most important online influences. 28. The position and level of participation can be measured through data-mining and monitoring systems. 29. Cyberspace has the capacity to influence governmental decisions. 30. Suppression of and resistance to public activities may damage the political system. 31. Cyberspace has a supportive and complementary role in governmental reform. 32. Increased media literacy strengthens political participation. 33. Cyberspace creates the capacity for political agency and participation capable of influencing legislators' decisions.
Capacity of cyberspace and social media to develop political participation	How can the capacities and tools of social media direct citizens' participation in informal political discussions toward the objectives desired by public officials, and what capacities are available for this purpose?	1. Cyberspace has a mirroring capacity that reflects social realities. 2. Media literacy should be strengthened to help users distinguish pathways and narratives. 3. Cyberspace can increase social knowledge and expose citizens to diverse viewpoints. 4. Political goals and perspectives can be disseminated through relevant hashtags, active discussion spaces, and public opinion polls. 5. Political participation can be encouraged by publishing official content in attractive language with the assistance of artists and media professionals. 6. Officials should consider citizens' opinions and criticisms and respond to them. 7. Social networks can be formed through trust-building among audiences and social groups. 8. Users' capacities can be increased by making use of the technical facilities of social networks. 9. Social networks provide an appropriate space for mutual and understanding-oriented public dialogue. 10. Social media can expand the public visibility of citizens' views and collective decisions concerning social affairs. 11. Social

		networks function as social and political barometers. 12. Social media can act as an alternative medium when mass media lack freedom. 13. Citizen-oriented media operating within the law can build trust and strengthen political participation. 14. Networks and political behavior can be structured within a networked model. 15. Social media enables interactive communication. 16. Officials can construct a successful model of desired political participation through the management of network production and suitable content distribution. 17. Users' mental representations can be identified, extracted, classified, and incorporated into policymaking. 18. Government-oriented think tanks can be created around specific political topics in cyberspace. 19. New and active social groups on different platforms can reveal capacities already present in society.
Actual manifestations and examples of political participation in cyberspace	Can all citizen actions expressed through different forms of mass confrontation in cyberspace be regarded as political participation, and how might such a setting influence Iran's political future?	1. Even overt political opposition may push the government toward more constructive decisions. 2. Reconsideration of governmental practices in response to sometimes intense online behavior is a governance necessity. 3. Not all citizen actions in cyberspace should be labeled political participation. 4. Only actions directly related to political and governmental debates and decision-making constitute political participation. 5. Creating a participatory online environment can influence the country's political future. 6. Increased political knowledge, awareness, and free expression can improve governmental decisions in line with national interests. 7. Social networks have become citizens' second living environment and are connected to their primary life in the physical world. 8. Cyberspace functions as a continuation of physical social reality. 9. Iran's political future can be anticipated through in-depth analysis and data mining of cyberspace. 10. Emotional atmosphere-building may occur under the direction of biased actors pursuing specific objectives. 11. Emotionally charged narratives based on local paradigms may disrupt regional subcultures. 12. Participation in social media can transform cultural and political preferences. 13. Social media may create relative satisfaction or at least provide a channel for emotional release. 14. Cyberspace creates networked behavior. 15. Online political participation may either align with or distance itself from the dominant political discourse. 16. Political participation contributes to social dynamism and reproduces political vitality, political calm, and political competition. 17. Expressions of party and group positions, identification of supporters and opponents, protests, riots, and social rebellion may all be interpreted politically as forms of participation. 18. Political participation occurs when actions generate influence.
Actual manifestations and examples of political participation in cyberspace	Do participation in online polls, evaluation of official programs, support for an uncontested government-backed group, or voting in single-list elections constitute political participation, or are they merely supportive participation?	1. Political participation occurs when citizens are involved in policymaking and major national decisions. 2. Participation in polls or support for an uncontested group can be considered political participation with a supportive orientation. 3. Genuine political participation requires an open and competitive environment in which citizens can express different views and demands. 4. Online opinion polling can include data mining of views, statements, posts, reactions, likes, followers, transactions, engagement indicators, and the influence of pages and accounts. 5. Political participation should allow ordinary and marginalized groups to move toward legitimate national and governmental objectives. 6. Voluntariness and freedom of choice are essential elements of political participation. 7. Moving beyond single-list support can produce a more vibrant and dynamic political environment. 8. Political votes do not fundamentally differ in nature between virtual and physical environments. 9. Discourse and diversity of opinion are necessary for political participation in cyberspace. 10. Officials' entry into this field can provide a basis for political analysis and evaluation of their political integrity.
Role of governments in the development of political participation	What effects might officials' involvement in organizing voluntary political participation and monitoring citizens' political interests in cyberspace have on Iran's future political environment?	1. Officials should maintain regulated, transparent, and purposeful participation aimed at enhancing political literacy and participation. 2. Filtering can create economic and ethical harm by expanding circumvention markets and exposing emotionally driven and uninformed users to harmful environments. 3. Official involvement may increase participation, attract citizens' views and demands, improve state-society communication, enhance officials' understanding of political interests, and strengthen accountability. 4. Official organization may also lead to censorship of criticism, manipulation of public opinion, weakening of independent civic activities, securitization, and political closure. 5. Monitoring citizens' political interests in cyberspace is possible. 6. Such monitoring may contribute to a more desirable political future. 7. Political interests and orientations of public opinion should be monitored and refined. 8. Political vitality may disappear when

		participation becomes involuntary. 9. Excessive organization by officials may contribute to the decline of political participation by destroying its voluntary and autonomous character. 10. Society may become channelized and one-dimensional. 11. Cyberspace enables officials to identify public mental representations and public opinion. 12. Governments should provide technological infrastructure and social networks to facilitate citizen communication and free discussion. 13. Channelizing and directing political topics can generate new restrictions. 14. The government should avoid organizing participation in ways that undermine voluntary engagement.
Role of governments in the development of political participation	If political participation is defined as citizens' voluntary action, does joining organizations or attending physical or virtual mass gatherings following official calls constitute political participation?	1. Organizational channelization may transform political openness into participation aversion. 2. Merely joining organizations or attending gatherings following an official call does not necessarily constitute political participation. 3. Genuine participation requires citizens' freedom and autonomy in decision-making. 4. Officially organized participation may become formal, performative, or symbolic rather than voluntary and independent. 5. Political participation is more influential when it is voluntary and organized by nongovernmental bodies. 6. Citizens' actions in virtual and physical environments can constitute political participation or related components. 7. Citizens' absence from domestic social networks and messaging applications indicates distrust in the government and domestic platforms. 8. Political calls issued by ruling officials may undermine the meaning of political participation. 9. The concept of mass gathering originates in the era of traditional media and has a different function in the age of social media. 10. Political participation is a multidimensional process. 11. Both attendance and nonattendance in political gatherings can constitute forms of political participation. 12. Opinion leaders and pioneering cyberspace actors can guide political discussions.
Type of messaging application or social network influencing the success or failure of political participation	Can the type of messaging application or social network used by Iranian users influence the success or failure of political participation?	1. Audience trust in a platform and understanding users' underlying mental orientations are decisive. 2. Platforms used by Iranian citizens can significantly influence the success or failure of political participation. 3. Social media enables rapid and easy sharing of ideas and perspectives. 4. Platforms can create strong and cohesive networks among individuals and real-world political groups. 5. Messaging applications and social networks can disseminate political ideas and movements that strengthen participation. 6. Platforms can increase public awareness and generate effective social movements. 7. Social media can encourage others to participate politically. 8. Platforms can contribute to political and social change. 9. Trust between social networks and their audiences is a determining factor. 10. Platforms can influence citizens' participation or nonparticipation in government-defined political processes. 11. Global social networks play a major role in developing political participation in Iran. 12. Restrictions on messaging applications and social networks may transform or erode political participation. 13. The choice of messaging application itself can become a political issue in Iranian society. 14. Use of domestic platforms may be interpreted as support for the government, while use of foreign platforms may be interpreted as disregard for governmental preferences. 15. Users may select foreign platforms because of personal preferences, speed, efficiency, or the presence of friends, customers, or professional communities. 16. Active and transparent participation requires a degree of platform independence.
Type of messaging application or social network influencing the success or failure of political participation	How can social media and political participation contribute to fundamental political reform in Iranian society, and does the type of platform affect such reform?	1. Political participation requires an appropriate environment, hope for change, and a perceived possibility of transformation. 2. Fundamental reform can be promoted through awareness-building, accurate information, conversion of online participation into offline action, creation of participatory groups and pages, and influence on officials and representatives. 3. Social media becomes politically influential when it is connected to actual society and everyday life. 4. Reforming lifestyles, gradually transforming users' thinking, and creating social and political understanding around elections and participation are among the most important functions of social networks. 5. Political culture-building should be grounded in recognition of subcultures. 6. Dialogue on current political issues, especially at peaks of participation such as elections, can reveal public mental models, cognitive tensions, and public opinion. 7. Governments should use cyberspace capacities to implement socially demanded reforms before political pressures develop into security crises. 8. Fundamental reform requires freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and interaction among competing ideas. 9. Messaging applications and social networks facilitate communication and accelerate political participation. 10. Political reform is closely related to

		the balance of power. 11. Cyberspace has a supportive and explanatory role in political change rather than an exclusively fundamental or decisive role.
News blockage and its role in political participation	If news blockage exists in Iran's actual political environment, what role might it play in the formation and development of political participation in cyberspace?	1. Politically marginalized groups may suddenly enter field-based participation when political or informational closure intensifies. 2. Under news blockage, cyberspace can support participation through information dissemination, social movements, expression of viewpoints, political awareness, newsletters, websites, and blogs. 3. Social networks can gradually transform political thinking and create social and political understanding around elections and participation. 4. Increasing participation is an inherent characteristic of social networks. 5. Multiple narratives may create ambiguity and rumors. 6. The concept of complete news blockage belongs more to the era of traditional-media dominance than to the age of new media. 7. Preventing information leakage and withholding accurate information creates a politically opaque environment. 8. Limited or incomplete information can reduce political participation. 9. News gatekeeping may redirect public opinion toward governmental preferences through selective dissemination. 10. Perceived news blockage reduces trust in domestic media. 11. Not every form of online information dissemination should be considered news. 12. Citizens use cyberspace to express demands when their needs are not met in physical reality.
News blockage and its role in political participation	What effects does distinguishing between an individual and a media organization as the source of news blockage have on the representation of Iran's actual political environment?	1. Political participation may become unbalanced when charismatic individuals are inaccessible. 2. Online views and positions may constitute one part of political participation when accompanied by political action. 3. Expressing an opinion without present and effective action does not fully constitute political participation. 4. Participation includes voting, attending gatherings, offering constructive proposals to officials, and forming civic organizations. 5. Effective participation combines awareness with practical and constructive activity. 6. News blockage in the domestic political environment directs citizens toward foreign social networks. 7. A balance between the supply and demand of accurate news requires one or more nongovernmental media sources. 8. Media censorship and divergence between lived realities and mediated representation can push semi-active citizens toward passivity. 9. News blockage and censorship suppress the public voice and weaken motivation for participation. 10. Media positions generally reflect the preferences of media owners. 11. Media organizations exert greater influence than individuals. 12. News blockage is a major obstacle to political participation. 13. Information blockage may polarize news, widen social divisions, and generate verbal and subsequently behavioral tensions.
Dominant political discourse and its role in developing participation	When citizens express positions toward officials and policies in cyberspace but do not accompany those positions with political action, can this be called political participation?	1. Expressing political positions concerning officials' performance can be regarded as the most civil form of political participation. 2. Governmental political authority in cyberspace depends on public support. 3. The government can influence public attitudes only when it possesses trust and credibility. 4. Transparency, information disclosure, dialogue, interaction, attention to public problems, and rapid online response can strengthen governmental authority. 5. Transparent policies, active interaction, and prompt feedback support political authority in cyberspace. 6. Political participation is fully realized only when it has an observable behavioral manifestation. 7. Online positions and reactions may contribute to social understanding. 8. The issue can be divided between holding a political position and undertaking political action. 9. Merely holding a position toward the government may not constitute political participation. 10. Opposition to policies may nevertheless represent political agency. 11. Political participation ranges from expressing opinions to highly intense political action. 12. Citizens' understanding and orientation toward participation are more important than mere presence in cyberspace. 13. Cyberspace can facilitate the identification and development of political elites through the attraction and cultivation of ideas.
Dominant political discourse and its role in developing participation	Is governmental political authority in cyberspace dependent on public support, and through what mechanisms can it be realized?	1. Political authority is realized through active and influential public presence. 2. Networks of citizens intellectually aligned with the political system can support authority online. 3. Cyberspace transmits political ideas, viewpoints, programs, and public services. 4. Online political participation can develop citizens' political culture. 5. Governmental authority can be consolidated through appropriate infrastructural preparation. 6. The Iranian government lacks sufficient attraction and authority in cyberspace because of its restrictive or anti-political approach to the online sphere. 7. Cyberspace reflects the attitudes and orientations of governments. 8. One common political definition of

		authority concerns citizens' recognition of the legitimate exercise of law. 9. Policymakers' limited understanding of the new media environment, combined with citizens' growing demand for information and platform-based life, weakens the production of online authority. 10. Political authority cannot be sustained without public support. 11. A government with genuine public backing has less need for filtering. 12. A governance vacuum exists in cyberspace. 13. Political authority faces fragmented and poorly integrated public opinions. 14. Clear frameworks and strategies consistent with the principles of political participation are required. 15. Cyberspace is not naturally a formal governmental arena unless officials participate informally and interactively.
Facilitative nature of cyberspace in developing political participation	Can political participation in cyberspace facilitate the development of political elites?	1. Cyberspace provides unrestricted exposure to diverse ideas. 2. Elite development may occur through self-criticism and comparison of ideas with informed and scholarly discourses. 3. Cyberspace provides a relatively open environment for expressing abstract reactions and emotions toward political events. 4. Public political behavior appears in tweets, posts, comments, blogs, videos, and online news. 5. Participation has positive effects when information is managed responsibly and users' awareness is enhanced. 6. Political elites must act responsibly and intelligently to promote political productivity. 7. Cyberspace complements physical reality. 8. Elite development can be supported through awareness-building, virtual civic organizations, dialogue, and public enlightenment. 9. The circulation and confrontation of ideas may refine more accurate political perspectives when media freedom is protected within legal frameworks. 10. Cyberspace facilitates political elite development by easing communication. 11. Individuals' abilities can be identified and made visible through cyberspace and other media. 12. Elite ideas require recognizable standards and principles. 13. Political influencers are not necessarily political intellectuals or elites; they may have influence without possessing depth or adhering to foundational principles of political participation.
Facilitative nature of cyberspace in developing political participation	Does the opportunity to express abstract reactions or emotions toward political events constitute political participation, and how should its definition and effectiveness be assessed?	1. Cyberspace gives political participation a new form through the interaction of different ideas. 2. Interaction among ideas creates multiple forms of discourse. 3. Cyberspace may promote individualism because each person can independently produce content, consume information, and communicate. 4. Digital individualism may separate individuals from collective life and reduce active participation in political processes. 5. Political participation should be strengthened online to counter excessive individualism. 6. Cyberspace can promote political awareness, criticism, media recognition, political culture, and innovation. 7. Cyberspace may be more influential than traditional political organizations and official platforms. 8. News authority has shifted from traditional media toward cyberspace. 9. Purely passive and abstract behavior does not constitute participation. 10. Online passivity may turn active citizens into semi-active citizens and semi-active citizens into inactive ones. 11. Abstract reactions and feelings should not automatically be considered political participation. 12. Networks require purposeful formation and organization. 13. Networked behavior should be conscious and goal-oriented. 14. Political participation has several levels, including explanation, promotion, and mutual understanding, as well as counter-explanation, counter-promotion, and misunderstanding. 15. Abstract reactions may constitute a low level of participation if political participation is understood as a graded rather than binary concept.
Nature of political participation in virtual and real environments	Considering the individualistic nature of cyberspace, why is political participation necessary in this environment, and is it necessary to establish a discourse of participation?	1. Collective worlds are formed through the aggregation of individuals and resources. 2. Political participation gains meaning through both presence and absence in cyberspace. 3. Individualism does not have a fixed or isolated meaning in networked environments. 4. The networked structure of cyberspace itself creates the conditions for discourse. 5. Social media is not purely individualistic because of its inherently networked nature. 6. Strengthening networks can contribute to the development of political participation. 7. Political discourse and political participation are not conceptually identical. 8. No absolute obligation exists beyond the provision of necessary infrastructure and citizens' willingness to participate. 9. Cyberspace is one possibility among several, and the government should provide the conditions required for participation. 10. Active participation by official media is influential. 11. Merely providing opportunities for reaction and emotional expression should not automatically be called political participation.
Nature of political participation in virtual and real environments	What similarities and differences exist between political participation in social networks and political participation in	1. Cyberspace provides an environment in which individuals can practice political agency. 2. Exposure to competing ideas contributes to the maturation of political participation. 3. Similarities include social

Iran's physical social environment, and does online participation perform a socially facilitative role?

interaction, information dissemination, awareness-building, and online events or elections; differences include the form of communication, degree of transparency, and level of influence. 4. Cyberspace creates opportunities for closer interaction, exchange of information, criticism, and empathy. 5. Online participation expands elites' public communication and interaction with society. 6. Cyberspace also creates risks of misinformation, personalized criticism, and declining respect for others. 7. Online participation can be socially facilitative when undertaken responsibly and intelligently. 8. Social networks support political development by connecting audiences, elites, and the government. 9. Participation in physical reality is assessed through voting, party membership, political support, demonstrations, and similar events. 10. Online participation is assessed through following political actors, groups, or media and through likes, dislikes, comments, forwarding, reposting, and content sharing. 11. Social networks mirror the underlying characteristics of society. 12. Social networks can facilitate broad public participation in governance. 13. Public opinion and collective mental representations are increasingly shaped through cyberspace and new communication technologies. 14. Political activity may emerge as an outcome of dialogue within social networks. 15. Participation in social networks and political action substantially overlap. 16. Social networks possess a high capacity to facilitate political participation when the established political system recognizes and legitimizes such participation. 17. There is no fundamental difference in participants' identities or motivations; the main differences concern the instrument and mode of expression. 18. Online and offline political participation are closely related and should be analyzed as an integrated package.

The findings related to the general capacity of cyberspace indicated that experts largely regarded social media as a potentially influential but conditional arena for political participation. They emphasized that cyberspace could create a bottom-up communication route through which citizens express demands, concerns, criticisms, and political priorities. Such communication could indirectly affect governmental decisions, legislative processes, and the balance of political power. Experts nevertheless maintained that online participation did not automatically produce legislative or institutional change. Its actual influence depended on whether governmental institutions recognized online demands, responded to public concerns, and established mechanisms for translating online communication into formal decision-making. The absence of such mechanisms could lead to frustration, loss of political trust, and a perception that participation had failed to produce tangible outcomes.

A major finding concerned the mediating role of trusted political and social actors. Experts stated that recognized cyberspace actors, opinion leaders, civic figures, and politically active users could operate as intermediaries between citizens and governmental institutions. These actors were viewed as capable of interpreting citizens' demands, reducing misunderstanding, organizing public dialogue, and transferring concerns from society to decision-makers. Their effectiveness, however,

depended on the public trust they had accumulated. Social media was therefore not understood merely as a technological environment, but as a relational system in which credibility, reputation, and trust determined whether political messages could influence citizens or officials.

The experts also identified multiple indicators through which online political participation could be evaluated. Quantitative indicators included views, likes, dislikes, comments, reposts, followers, engagement rates, online transactions, participation in polls, and the diffusion of political hashtags. Qualitative indicators included the content of political discussions, the diversity of expressed viewpoints, the degree of critical reasoning, the presence of dialogue, the legitimacy of public demands, and the capacity of online interactions to influence decision-making. Data-mining and monitoring systems were considered useful for identifying public concerns and political trends, although experts warned that numerical engagement should not be equated automatically with genuine political participation.

The findings further showed that experts drew a clear distinction between genuine participation and symbolic, supportive, or performative participation. Participation in an official poll, support for an uncontested group, or attendance at an event following a governmental call could represent a limited or supportive form of participation, but it was not necessarily equivalent to

autonomous political action. Genuine participation was associated with freedom of choice, voluntariness, competition, pluralism, and the ability to express alternative or critical viewpoints. When participation was excessively organized, directed, or channelized by authorities, it risked becoming ceremonial, formalistic, or politically instrumental rather than an authentic manifestation of citizens' agency.

Another important pattern involved the dual role of government. Experts recognized that government institutions could contribute positively by providing technological infrastructure, increasing political and media literacy, responding to citizens' criticisms, publishing transparent information, and creating opportunities for open political discussion. A responsive governmental presence could increase accountability, improve understanding of public needs, and strengthen trust. At the same time, experts expressed substantial concern about censorship, surveillance, political manipulation, filtering, securitization, and the weakening of independent civic action. Governmental organization of participation was therefore viewed as legitimate only when it facilitated voluntary engagement rather than replacing it with controlled participation.

Trust emerged as one of the most important determinants of future political participation. Experts linked citizens' avoidance of domestic platforms to distrust of governmental institutions, concerns about surveillance, technical limitations, and doubts about platform independence. Conversely, global networks were perceived as more attractive because of their reach, speed, efficiency, professional communities, and perceived independence. The choice of platform was itself interpreted as politically meaningful. Use of domestic platforms could be read as alignment with governmental preferences, whereas use of foreign platforms could represent technological preference, social convenience, distrust, or symbolic distance from official policies.

The type of platform was also considered influential because platforms differ in their architecture, visibility mechanisms, speed of information circulation, level of anonymity, opportunities for network formation, and capacity for political mobilization. Experts argued that platforms could accelerate awareness-building, connect political groups, spread political ideas, and encourage offline participation. However, the same technological

characteristics could also facilitate misinformation, emotional mobilization, polarization, and coordinated manipulation. Consequently, platform effects were not regarded as intrinsically democratic or authoritarian; they depended on governance structures, user practices, political culture, and the degree of communicative freedom.

The findings concerning political reform indicated that social media was viewed primarily as a supportive, explanatory, and facilitating mechanism rather than an autonomous source of fundamental political transformation. Experts believed that social media could increase awareness, circulate accurate information, establish participatory groups, connect citizens with representatives, and transform online engagement into offline action. Nevertheless, sustainable reform required broader structural conditions, including freedom of expression, political competition, hope for change, public trust, access to reliable information, and a favorable balance of political power. Online participation without institutional responsiveness or real-world organization was considered unlikely to generate fundamental reform.

News blockage and information restriction constituted another central theme. Experts argued that censorship and restricted access to news weakened trust in domestic media, encouraged citizens to move toward foreign platforms, and created a gap between lived reality and official representation. This gap could produce political passivity among some citizens, but it could also lead marginalized groups to participate more intensely when political pressure accumulated. News restriction was associated with rumors, competing narratives, polarization, and a politically opaque environment. Experts therefore regarded access to accurate and diverse information as a necessary precondition for informed political participation.

The distinction between political expression and political action was repeatedly emphasized. Some experts considered the expression of political views to be the most civil and accessible form of participation, particularly when citizens publicly evaluated the performance of officials or policies. Others argued that political participation required observable action, influence, or involvement in decision-making. According to this interpretation, expressing a view without attempting to translate it into practical action

represented political orientation rather than full participation. The overall pattern suggested that political participation should be understood as a continuum extending from awareness and expression to mobilization, organization, decision-making, and institutional influence.

Experts also described social media as a potential environment for the emergence and development of political elites. Exposure to diverse ideas, public debate, self-criticism, dialogue, and the circulation of political analysis could enable talented individuals to gain recognition and develop political competence. Virtual civic organizations and discussion networks could also support elite formation. However, experts sharply distinguished political elites from political influencers. Visibility, popularity, and the ability to attract followers were not considered sufficient evidence of political knowledge, ethical responsibility, or intellectual depth. Political elite development required informed reasoning, responsibility, adherence to political principles, and sustained engagement with public problems.

The individualistic character of cyberspace was another contested issue. Some experts argued that social media encourages individualism because users independently produce content, select information, and manage their interactions. Excessive individualism could disconnect users from collective action and convert active citizens into passive observers. Other experts rejected the idea that social media is fundamentally individualistic, emphasizing that its networked structure naturally produces interaction, collective identity, discourse formation, and group mobilization. The findings therefore indicated that cyberspace simultaneously supports individualized expression and networked collective action.

A further distinction was made between emotional reactions and meaningful participation. Abstract responses, temporary emotions, likes, symbolic support, and reactive comments were often classified as low-level participation or pre-political behavior. Experts maintained that conscious, purposeful, and organized communication was more likely to generate meaningful political outcomes. Nevertheless, even low-intensity behaviors could contribute to opinion formation, agenda-setting, and the visibility of public concerns. Thus, the political relevance of such behaviors depended on whether they remained isolated expressions or

became connected to sustained dialogue, collective organization, and political influence.

Finally, experts viewed online and offline participation as closely interconnected rather than separate phenomena. Cyberspace was described as an extension of social reality and, in some cases, as citizens' second living environment. Online practices allow individuals to rehearse political agency, encounter competing ideas, exchange information, criticize policies, and form collective interpretations. Offline participation remains visible through voting, party membership, demonstrations, and formal civic organizations, while online participation appears through following political actors, commenting, reposting, campaigning, and digital mobilization. The dominant view was that the future of political participation in Iran would increasingly emerge from the interaction between these two environments. Social media would function as a major facilitator of political participation only when online engagement was recognized, trusted, linked to institutional processes, and translated into consequential political action.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that experts regard social media as an increasingly central but inherently conditional arena for the future of political participation in Iran. Across the interviews, social media was not understood merely as a communication technology; rather, it was described as a political environment in which information circulation, public discussion, identity formation, mobilization, criticism, and attempts to influence governmental decision-making occur simultaneously. Experts emphasized that digital platforms can expand political awareness, facilitate bottom-up communication, strengthen public-opinion formation, and provide citizens with new opportunities to express demands. However, they also stressed that these capacities do not automatically lead to meaningful political influence. The effectiveness of online participation depends on public trust, political openness, access to accurate information, platform credibility, media literacy, governmental responsiveness, and the possibility of translating digital expression into institutional or real-world action. This interpretation is consistent with the broader understanding of politics in the network society, in which power and participation are increasingly organized through communication

networks rather than being confined to conventional institutions and mass media (F. Majlesi, 2020).

One of the principal findings was that social media creates a bottom-up communication channel through which citizens can express concerns, publicize unmet needs, criticize policies, and attempt to influence political authorities. Experts believed that such activities may indirectly shape governmental decisions and, under favorable circumstances, contribute to changes in policy and legislation. This finding aligns with the citizen communication mediation model, which explains that political news use and discussion can encourage expressive communication and subsequently promote political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2019). It is also compatible with evidence indicating that social networks can influence political participation through political discussion, political efficacy, and political culture (Rahbarghazi et al., 2017). The results therefore suggest that online communication has political relevance not only because it increases the availability of information, but because it enables citizens to interpret political developments collectively and articulate expectations toward the political system.

At the same time, experts expressed caution about equating all online behavior with political participation. They differentiated between political awareness, political expression, symbolic reactions, supportive participation, and consequential political action. Likes, views, comments, reposts, participation in polls, and expressions of approval or dissatisfaction were considered potential indicators of engagement, but not necessarily evidence of effective participation. Some experts regarded such actions as low-level forms of political participation, whereas others argued that participation must include observable influence, collective organization, or involvement in decision-making. This distinction supports the conceptual argument that political participation is multidimensional and includes institutional, noninstitutional, expressive, civic, and digitally mediated activities of different intensities (Weiss, 2020). The development of a specific scale for measuring political participation on social media also demonstrates that digital participation should be assessed through distinct behavioral and communicative indicators rather than being reduced to general platform use (Waeterloos et al., 2021).

The findings further indicated that meaningful political participation is defined by voluntariness, autonomy, plurality, and the possibility of choosing among competing alternatives. Experts generally considered participation in official polls, single-list elections, or government-organized gatherings to be supportive or limited forms of political participation unless citizens had genuine freedom of choice and the ability to express diverse or critical opinions. Excessive governmental direction was viewed as likely to transform participation into symbolic, performative, or ceremonial behavior. This interpretation is consistent with research on political participation and development in Iran, which emphasizes that participation supports political development when institutions provide meaningful opportunities for citizens to articulate demands and influence decisions (M. Sadat Hosseini, 2018). It also corresponds with futures-oriented analyses identifying political restrictions, institutional barriers, and weaknesses in responsiveness as obstacles to political development in Iran (Akhavan Kazemi & Nikounahad, 2019).

A central theme in the findings was the dual role of government in shaping online political participation. Experts noted that governmental institutions can contribute constructively by providing communication infrastructure, increasing political and media literacy, responding to criticism, publishing accurate information, and entering into transparent dialogue with citizens. Such actions may strengthen accountability, improve public trust, and increase the legitimacy of political institutions. However, government intervention may also have negative consequences when it takes the form of filtering, censorship, surveillance, manipulation of public opinion, political channelization, or the weakening of independent civic activity. The findings therefore suggest that the political consequences of governmental presence in cyberspace depend on whether such presence is facilitative and dialogical or controlling and coercive. This conclusion is compatible with comparative research showing that digital publics in politically restricted contexts differ according to the particular combination of openness, censorship, surveillance, and managed participation within each system (Toepfl, 2020).

The experts' concern about filtering and information restrictions was closely linked to public trust. They

argued that citizens' avoidance of domestic social networks and preference for foreign platforms may reflect distrust in government-controlled platforms, concerns about privacy and monitoring, and dissatisfaction with restrictions. Trust was also considered essential for governmental authority in cyberspace. Experts maintained that political authority cannot be reproduced online solely through formal power; it requires public credibility, responsiveness, and support. This observation is consistent with studies showing that the continued use of social networking sites for political participation depends on users' perceptions of usefulness, satisfaction, and the capacity of platforms to meet their communicative and political needs (Chen et al., 2019). It also reinforces the argument that political communication through social networks can shape political culture and participation only when the platform environment is perceived as meaningful and credible (Andreeva, 2019).

The type of platform used by citizens emerged as another significant factor. Experts believed that different platforms may facilitate or inhibit political participation because they differ in accessibility, technical efficiency, independence, visibility, speed of communication, and opportunities for network formation. Global platforms were often regarded as more influential because they offer broader reach, established user communities, and relatively diverse political content. Domestic platforms, in contrast, were sometimes associated with government preferences, restrictions, and reduced user trust. These findings support the view that the effects of social media are not independent of platform design and communication structure. Research on young voters has similarly shown that social media can affect political participation both directly and indirectly through political orientations and engagement patterns (Rehan et al., 2022). Likewise, findings from Iranian students indicate that use of social networks is related to political participation, although the nature and extent of this relationship depend on users' patterns of engagement (Ebrahimi et al., 2019).

Experts also emphasized that social media can increase political awareness and strengthen political socialization, particularly among younger citizens. Through repeated exposure to political content, users may gain access to competing viewpoints, learn political vocabulary, become familiar with public issues, and

develop greater confidence in expressing political opinions. This result is consistent with meta-analytic evidence indicating a generally positive relationship between young people's digital media use and civic or political engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). It also aligns with Iranian research on the role of virtual networks in electoral participation, which has highlighted their capacity to disseminate political information and influence engagement during elections (Shams, 2020). However, the present findings add that increased access to political information is not sufficient by itself. Political awareness becomes participatory only when citizens possess the literacy required to evaluate information and connect knowledge with purposeful action.

Media literacy was therefore identified as a major enabling condition. Experts believed that stronger media literacy could help users distinguish reliable information from rumors, identify manipulation, recognize political framing, and participate more responsibly. This is particularly important because social media can expose users to misinformation, emotionally charged narratives, and polarized interpretations of events. The finding is consistent with meta-analytic evidence indicating that exposure to opposing political viewpoints can have complex consequences. Cross-cutting exposure may broaden political understanding and increase tolerance, but it can also generate conflict, uncertainty, or withdrawal depending on the quality of communication and the surrounding political context (Matthes et al., 2019). Thus, the future participatory value of social media depends not only on exposure to diverse opinions but also on citizens' ability to engage with disagreement in an informed and deliberative manner.

The findings concerning protest and collective action demonstrated that social media can facilitate rapid political mobilization by circulating information, connecting dissatisfied citizens, and reducing the costs of coordination. Experts viewed digital platforms as capable of identifying grievances, organizing networks, and transforming dispersed political dissatisfaction into collective action. This interpretation is supported by research showing that social media facilitates protest through information provision, motivational processes, and the activation of social networks (Jost et al., 2018). Nevertheless, experts also warned that rapid online mobilization may be emotionally driven, fragmented, or

vulnerable to manipulation. This tension reflects the argument that networked protest combines extraordinary mobilizing power with organizational fragility, because digital networks can rapidly gather participants without necessarily developing leadership, strategic continuity, or stable organizational structures (Tufekci, 2017).

A further finding was that social media may contribute to political reform, but it is unlikely to serve as the sole or fundamental cause of structural transformation. Experts described cyberspace as a supportive, explanatory, and accelerating force that can increase public awareness, facilitate communication with political representatives, organize demands, and create pressure for reform. However, they emphasized that sustainable political reform requires institutional responsiveness, freedom of expression, political competition, public trust, and the possibility of converting online participation into offline organization and formal policymaking. This conclusion is important because it avoids technological determinism. Social media may amplify political capacities, but it cannot independently remove structural barriers to participation. The findings are compatible with studies highlighting the influence of political communication models and social networks on public attitudes while recognizing the continuing role of institutions and power relations (M. Majlesi, 2020).

The findings related to news blockage revealed that restrictions on information may produce contradictory political consequences. On the one hand, censorship, incomplete reporting, and inconsistencies between citizens' lived experiences and official media narratives can reduce trust, increase political passivity, and weaken motivation. On the other hand, information restrictions may drive users toward alternative media, foreign platforms, and informal networks, thereby increasing online discussion and political mobilization. Experts also believed that news blockage can produce rumor, narrative competition, and polarization. This finding corresponds with the view that social media may function as an alternative communication environment when traditional media are unable to provide diverse and credible political information (S. M. Sadat Hosseini, 2018). It also supports the finding that social networks influence political participation partly because they expand the availability and circulation of political information (Khaniki & Khojir, 2018).

The experts' responses showed that social media participation is strongly connected with social capital. Trusted actors, opinion leaders, digital activists, and recognized public figures were described as bridges between citizens and governmental institutions. Their ability to mobilize participation depended on credibility and accumulated public trust. This finding aligns with evidence that different forms of social capital within social networks are associated with different forms of political participation (Ahmadi, 2019). Bonding ties can strengthen political solidarity among like-minded users, while bridging ties can connect citizens to different groups and expand the circulation of political information. However, highly homogeneous networks may also reinforce polarization and limit exposure to alternative viewpoints.

Experts additionally regarded social media as a potential setting for identifying and cultivating political elites. The exchange of ideas, public criticism, self-reflection, and interaction with diverse political perspectives can reveal individuals with political competence and provide them with opportunities for visibility. Yet the experts distinguished sharply between political elites and political influencers. Popularity, large numbers of followers, and high engagement were not regarded as sufficient indicators of political knowledge or leadership capacity. This distinction is consistent with the broader finding that social media may shape political models and influence public attitudes without necessarily producing informed or responsible political leadership (M. Majlesi, 2020). The development of genuine political elites requires intellectual depth, ethical responsibility, sustained engagement, and the ability to connect digital influence with public problem-solving.

The findings also demonstrated that online and offline political participation should be examined as interconnected dimensions of the same political process. Experts described cyberspace as a continuation of social reality and as an environment in which citizens can practice political agency, exchange information, build networks, and prepare for offline participation. This interpretation is consistent with studies indicating that online communication and political discussion can influence conventional political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2019). It is also supported by research showing that social media use is associated with different forms of political engagement among Iranian

users (Khaniki & Khojir, 2018). The distinction between online and offline participation therefore concerns the tools and modes of action rather than two entirely separate forms of political life.

Overall, the findings suggest that the future of political participation in Iran will be shaped by the interaction of technological capacity, political institutions, communicative freedom, public trust, media literacy, and the responsiveness of government. Social media can expand political participation by reducing communication barriers, increasing awareness, strengthening networks, and enabling the expression of public demands. Yet it can also weaken meaningful participation when political activity is reduced to symbolic behavior, manipulated by authorities, fragmented by platform restrictions, or overwhelmed by misinformation and distrust. The results support previous research demonstrating a generally positive relationship between social media use and political participation, while also confirming that this relationship is mediated by political culture, efficacy, discussion, trust, and contextual conditions (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Rahbarghazi et al., 2017). Therefore, social media should be understood neither as an inherently democratizing technology nor merely as a threat to political order, but as a contested political infrastructure whose consequences depend on how citizens, platforms, and political institutions interact.

This study had several limitations. The findings were based on the perspectives of a purposively selected group of experts and therefore represent informed interpretations rather than the views of the entire Iranian population. Although efforts were made to include participants from communication sciences, political science, digital media, political analysis, and online activism, other relevant perspectives may not have been fully represented. The political sensitivity of the subject may also have influenced the degree of openness with which some participants expressed their opinions, despite the protection of anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms means that the technological and political conditions described by participants may evolve over time. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a context-dependent account of expert judgments rather than as fixed predictions about the future.

Future studies should examine the identified themes among different groups of citizens, including young voters, women, political activists, journalists, ethnic and linguistic minorities, residents of different provinces, and users of domestic and international platforms. Comparative research could investigate how political participation varies according to platform architecture, filtering conditions, levels of political trust, and patterns of media use. Longitudinal qualitative studies would be useful for assessing how perceptions of social media and political participation change during elections, protests, policy crises, or major technological transformations. Future research should also develop futures scenarios based on the drivers and uncertainties identified in this study and examine the pathways through which online expression is converted into offline participation, collective organization, and institutional influence.

Political institutions should recognize social media as a legitimate environment for public communication and establish transparent mechanisms for receiving, analyzing, and responding to citizens' online demands. Governmental involvement should facilitate voluntary participation rather than direct, channelize, or symbolically manufacture it. Public institutions should improve access to accurate information, reduce unnecessary restrictions, protect privacy, and strengthen confidence in digital platforms. Media-literacy education should be expanded to help citizens identify misinformation, evaluate political claims, and engage respectfully with competing viewpoints. Political parties, civil-society organizations, universities, and media institutions should create inclusive online discussion spaces that connect digital participation with practical civic and political action. Finally, trusted social actors and opinion leaders should be engaged as intermediaries between citizens and institutions while preserving their independence and public credibility.

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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