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Navigating the political minefield: strategies for online participation in a polarized society

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In this study, we explored political participation among young adults in Israel, with a particular focus on the impact of polarization on their engagement in online discourse. To this end, by extracting a total of 23,223 Facebook activities (e.g., likes, comments) from 50 participants, we analyzed 2,323 partisan-political and 1,434 socio-political patterns in political and social identity expressions. In contrast to previous research that predominantly relied only on self-report or observed activities, we used direct activity logs, combined with in-depth interviews, thereby obtaining a more detailed insight into user behavior. The results revealed that Facebook usage frequently reflects a hidden “political self,” characterized by non-committal interactions (e.g., frequent likes). The study participants were more at ease within the socio-political domain than in partisan-political discussions. We also found that young adults use social media to cautiously navigate their political and social identities in polarized settings. Based on the results, we propose a novel framework for the analysis of social media engagement that could be useful for policymakers, politicians, and social organizations in crafting strategies to target young adults. The study concludes with the discussion of the necessity to confront polarization by promoting a balanced approach to digital discourse among young adults.

KEYWORDS

social media, political polarization, political engagement, partisan content, online political expression

Introduction

In recent years, political participation of younger citizens has considerably declined, resulting in young people's apparent distancing from involvement in institutional politics (Milner, 2013). A common reason underlying young people's tendency to refrain from engaging in traditional politics or their low political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2012) is their sense of helplessness regarding their ability to influence the political process (Bennett, 2008; Quintelier, 2007; Russell, 2005). However, there is robust evidence to suggest that today's young adults tend to be actively involved in non-political civic activities, such as political consumerism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014), demonstrations, signing petitions, and other forms of non-political partisan engagement both online and offline (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Lee and Horsley, 2017; Stolle et al., 2005). This raises the need to explore why non-political civic activities appear to attract more engagement from young adults. Understanding this phenomenon is particularly important in polarized environments where the dynamics of civic participation may significantly differ from those in more homogeneous cultures.

The current state of Israel is an example of a setting marked by political instability, where contentious elections and divisive government decisions have significantly heightened this instability (Cohen, 2024; Matusiak, 2023). Polarization in Israel, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is deeply rooted in ideological divides, judicial reforms, and the

role of religion in public life (Friedman et al., 2024). In recent years, these cleavages have intensified, leading to a fragmented society with sharply contrasting political groups. This fragmentation has also challenged citizens' sense of belonging, thereby further distancing young adults from active political participation (Belder, 2021; Sheizaf, 2018). Accordingly, in the present study, we seek to identify and analyze actual usage patterns of young adults in the polarized society of Israel. Our overarching goal is to understand the relationship between the types of content (partisan-political or socio-political) and participation or non-participation in online discourse. We also seek to identify strategies used to address social and political challenges arising from the use of social media sites in a polarized environment. Our results are thus expected to enrich the public and academic debate on the potential and limitations of digital deliberation.

Literature review

Political participation and political expression

In the literature, political participation, engagement, and expression are conceptualized as distinct yet interconnected aspects of political communication (Johann, 2022; Papagiannidis and Manika, 2016). Political participation is generally understood to involve citizens' actions intended to directly or indirectly influence government actions (Johann, 2022; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2017). Over time, this understanding of political participation has extended to additionally incorporate non-traditional methods of engagement while retaining political expression and engagement as its critical components (Johann, 2022; Papagiannidis and Manika, 2016; Ruess et al., 2023). Furthermore, political engagement is generally understood as citizens' active involvement into political processes, such as voting and holding leaders accountable (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014).

As a vital aspect of political participation, political engagement concerns citizens' contribution to shaping leadership through democratic means. Yet another essential component of political participation, political expression, is defined as the communication of individual political views and identity without a specific outcome in mind (Lane et al., 2022). Said differently, political expression allows individuals to voice their opinions and contribute to public discourse; accordingly, political expression plays a crucial role in maintaining a connection between citizens and their government (Bollinger and Callamard, 2021; Lane et al., 2022).

Despite being interrelated and interconnected, political participation, engagement, and expression serve their distinct purposes within the broader political landscape. Political participation frequently encompasses both engagement and expression, making the latter key components of citizens' interactions with and impact on their governments (Barrett and Brunton-Smith, 2014; Cho et al., 2018).

Political participation in the digital age

With the advent of the digital age, particularly the internet and social media, the concept of political participation has considerably expanded to incorporate a broader array of activities (Papagiannidis

and Manika, 2016; Ruess et al., 2023; Theocharis and Van Deth, 2017). While, traditionally, political participation was closely associated with offline activities like voting and campaigning, the emergence and coming into wide use of digital platforms has broadened this definition to include online discussions, digital activism, and other forms of online engagement (Papagiannidis and Manika, 2016; Theocharis and Van Deth, 2017).

The emergence of social media platforms provided new ways for citizens to engage in political issues and communicate their views to others and the authorities. Among their other functionalities, social media platforms have enabled users to actively participate in political discussions, share information, and mobilize support for various causes (Kim and Hoewe, 2023).

The structural and architectural features of social media platforms play a critical role in shaping how citizens engage in political participation and the nature of political discourse. Bossetta (2023) introduces the concept of "digital architectures," which emphasizes the design elements of platforms like Facebook and Twitter and how they actively mediate users' political behavior both online and offline. These architectures are not neutral; they embed specific functionalities that influence the type and extent of political participation, highlighting the concrete implications of platform design for democratic processes. Similarly, Boulianne et al. (2024) provide evidence of how different platforms foster varying patterns of political engagement, driven by their unique network features. Their study demonstrates how political ideology shapes the adoption and political use of platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and WhatsApp, revealing a funnel effect: while many users adopt a platform, fewer encounter political content, and even fewer actively post. This digital shift has proven to be particularly revolutionary for minority groups that were previously marginalized in traditional political processes (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Attending to the shifting landscapes brought about by the digital era, several recent studies have thoroughly explored differences in citizens' motivations for online and offline political participation (Johann, 2022; Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Ruess et al., 2023), where offline participation involves traditional methods like voting and campaigning, while online participation includes activities such as social media engagement, online petitions, and digital advocacy (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2017). In the current media ecology, both forms of participation are crucial, with online platforms frequently complementing offline efforts by expanding the reach of political messages and enhancing overall engagement (Kim and Hoewe, 2023).

In this context, social media has become a powerful tool for political expression and participation, particularly among younger generations (Johann, 2022; Ruess et al., 2023). Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019) further examined how youth utilize platform affordances, such as political hashtags and memetic dimensions, to engage in collective political expression, as demonstrated in their study of youth-created videos on *musical.ly* during the 2016 US presidential election. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok allow individuals to share their political views, engage in discussions, and mobilize support for various causes (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Lane et al., 2022). This dimension of social platform use has opened new opportunities for civic engagement, enabling a broader range of voices to be heard in the political arena (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Lane et al., 2022).

However, in polarized societies where political differences lead to social fragmentation and exclusion of dissenting voices (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), the otherwise extensive online political expression can be inhibited by the fear of social isolation. As posited by the Spiral of Silence theory (Kushin et al., 2019; Rafique et al., 2023), if individuals believe that their opinions are in the minority, they may be reluctant to express their views online, which adversely affects diversity of perspectives expressed in public discourse (Kushin et al., 2019). More specifically, previous research on the factors linked to the avoidance of online political participation revealed that, in polarized societies, people prefer to avoid political expressions on Facebook or are cautious and reluctant when expressing themselves online. In many previous studies on psychological and social processes motivating or preventing online political participation, a major argument concerned the need to determine the factors that either motivate or discourage young people to engage in political participation (Thorson, 2014; Vraga et al., 2015). Furthermore, despite social media platforms' potential as a space for engaged political discourse (Bode, 2012), the ways in which people experience their political use of such platforms and the factors affecting their activities remain largely unexplored (Vraga et al., 2015).

Forms of political participation

Despite prior attempts to conceptually distinguish between the concepts of political and civic involvement (e.g., Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2011), still, recent arguments were made to treat these two types of involvement as a unified concept (Ward and Tavits, 2019; Weiss, 2020). For example, while some studies classified protest consumerism as a form of political participation (Stolle et al., 2005), others considered it to be a form of civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

Broadly speaking, political participation can be categorized into social-political participation, which focuses on civic engagement and addresses social issues, and partisan-political participation, which is geared toward supporting specific political parties or candidates (Salman et al., 2017). Each of the aforementioned two forms of participation plays a different role in shaping political identities and affecting political outcomes (Ruckelshaus, 2022). While social-political participation is frequently seen as citizens' duty to advocate for the public good and support other citizens' rights, partisan-political participation is more concerned with advancing the interests of a particular political ideology or party (Aixa et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2017). Furthermore, while social-political participation is geared toward promoting civic engagement and social change, partisan-political participation focuses on achieving political goals through the electoral process. In many cases, these forms of participation intersect individuals engaging in both civic and partisan activities to advance their political beliefs (Ruckelshaus, 2022).

While several previous studies investigated social-political participation and partisan-political participation on social media platforms like Facebook (Kaun and Uldam, 2018; Liu et al., 2017), an important limitation of this body of work is that most of these studies analyzed self-reported individuals' experiences of using Facebook for political participation. These types of datasets were commonly collected, for instance, through semi-structured in-depth interviews (Thorson, 2014), surveys (Liu et al., 2017), or a combination of the two

(Vraga et al., 2015). Another limitation is that previous studies focused on US samples. Accordingly, an in-depth analysis of actual political participation activities within a specific period is lacking. To fill this gap in the literature, in the present study, we examine how young people in Israel express their social-political and partisan-political views through social media, with a particular focus on the role of political identity in shaping these expressions.

Social media and political participation: the Israeli context

In Israel, social media have become a powerful tool for political communication, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Accordingly, social media platforms come into wide use among Israeli citizens as a means to engage with political content, allowing users to share their views, mobilize support, and participate in political discussions (Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai, 2023; Yarchi et al., 2017). Facebook, in particular, has played an important role in shaping political discourse in Israel, especially during periods of conflict (Yarchi et al., 2017). Yet, to this day, it remains one of the largest and most significant platforms for those aged 18 and above in the country (Bezeq, 2024). In recent years, during the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, Israeli citizens have extensively used Facebook to express their views and claims in support of each side (Yarchi et al., 2017). Social media and online political activity in Israel often reflect the current political discourse in the country. For example, Tzelgov and Wilson (2024) show that platforms like X help spread populist ideas, especially among religious-nationalist groups. By analyzing tweets from Israeli lawmakers between 2013 and 2022, they found that populist messages became more common among political actors. They also discuss whether the increase in populist ideas overlaps with other trends, such as affective polarization or the role of opposition parties. While they acknowledge a connection between populism and affective polarization, their study focuses on the behavior of political elites rather than public opinion, which could be shaped by other various factors. Similarly, Roznai and Cohen (2023) studied the recent judicial overhaul in Israel and described it as a populist shift in the political sphere. They explained that Israel's political system and social challenges make it more vulnerable to populism. In the present study, we explore how Israeli citizens, particularly the younger cohort, use social media for political participation. By analyzing the content young Israeli engage with and the political identities they express, we explore the relationship between political expression and participation in the highly polarized society of Israel.

Problem statement and research questions

In recent years, social media platforms have come to play an increasingly important role in Israel's political processes. Particularly visible was their use during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; in addition, some Israeli politicians have come to use these platforms for their election campaigns. For instance, during the political turmoil between 2020 and 2022, Israel saw three different prime ministers within a short span: Benjamin Netanyahu, Naftali Bennett, and Yair Lapid. Each of these leaders heavily relied on Facebook as a central tool for

communicating with the public during their brief terms in office (Yavetz, 2024). This period of instability, marked by frequent elections and shifting leadership, highlighted the essential role of social media platforms in shaping political discourse and managing crises (Yavetz, 2024). Unlike in offline environments, on Facebook, people may not differentiate their self-presentation to different audiences. However, there is evidence indicating that people can find creative ways to engage politically on Facebook, such as via adopting a neutral political stance or using humor in their political expressions (Thorson, 2014). Furthermore, being an established social media platform where people can freely express their views, Facebook enables researchers to conveniently collect data on various social-political matters. As argued by Vraga et al. (2015), individuals who express themselves politically on social media frequently do so in a non-binding manner with minimal risk, oftentimes resorting to humor and engaging with consensual content (Cervi and Divon, 2023).

Accordingly, in the present study, we aim to identify and analyze precautionary patterns used by younger Israelis regarding their political behavior on Facebook. Drawing on previous research on individuals' expressing their political identity on Facebook, we address the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do young Israeli adults use Facebook as a deliberative tool for partisan-political expression?

RQ2: How do young adults use Facebook as a deliberative tool for socio-political expression?

Methodology

In order to explore communicative behaviors in a polarized society, we adopted an interpretivist approach. The reason underlying this choice was that, emphasizing qualitative understanding over quantitative measures, interpretivism affords a deeper engagement with participants, making it more suitable for examining complex social interactions (Žukauskas et al., 2018).

Research approach

In the present investigation, we combined an inductive methodology with a qualitative approach. Conducting in-depth interviews allowed us to obtain detailed accounts of individuals' experiences and perspectives on online engagement. Overall, this approach not only allows for direct conversations with participants but also enables subsequent verification and analysis of their actual behaviors in the online environment. The combination of qualitative insights and observational validation provides a nuanced understanding of the political implications of their interactions, actions, and intentions.

Participants and recruitment

In order to recruit a meaningful sample to analyze the studied phenomenon (Shkedi, 2003), purposive sampling was used. As argued

by Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling is a best approach to selecting participants who closely align with the study's aims and objectives, thereby increasing credibility of the data and results. In the present study, we selected purposive sampling as a rational and efficient way to identify informants capable of providing rich, meaningful, and pertinent information on the phenomenon under consideration. Our final sample comprised a total of 50 active Facebook users aged 18–34 years old (mean age: 24.7 years) (see Table 1 for further detail).

The criterion for selection was that these users log into Facebook at least once a day for a minimum of 15 min per week. The assumption was that such individuals would produce more varied and frequent self-expression content. To recruit the study participants, an advertisement was placed on the Tel Aviv University School of Communication website, with friends reposting it using the snowball sampling technique. The ad specified that all candidate participants should be willing to be interviewed, be active Facebook users, be willing to browse through their accounts during the interview and not be in the last semester of their studies. For their participation in our investigation, all respondents received a reimbursement of 40 shekels. The ad also featured a photograph of coffee and pastry, suggesting that a snack would be provided before or during the interview. Those interested in participating were asked to tag themselves so that we could contact them directly.

Data gathering process and research period

The data collection process started with a pilot study conducted in two phases and involving a mixed group of a total of 12 participants. The first phase took place in January 2015 and included five interviews along with Facebook activity data sampling. The second phase took place in June 2017, with seven additional interviews and data sampling. These preliminary phases were essential for refining the data collection methods and ensuring the research approach was effective. After the pilot study, participant recruitment for the main study commenced. To this end, a structured questionnaire was developed, and a Facebook post was published inviting students with active Facebook accounts to participate in a study conducted by researchers from the Department of Communication at Tel Aviv University. Interested participants responded via Facebook Messenger, and a link to the online questionnaire was provided. The snowball sampling method was used, resulting in the identification of a total of 50 suitable participants.

The primary research took place during July–August 2017, with face-to-face interviews conducted at the Communication Department offices at Tel Aviv University. These interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants; all interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription. Each interview started with an explanation of the research objectives, interview structure, and answers to any of the participants' questions. To ensure comprehensive and ethical data collection on user behavior and Facebook activity, the participants were asked to extract their Facebook activity data over a 30-day period, in the presence of the researchers and with full consent of the respondents. In this way, the data were collected using screen recording software (QuickTime Player) with a resolution of 1,200 × 800 pixels, capturing all browsing data from the previous 30 days. The total size of user activity data collected was 22.6 GB. After

TABLE 1 Participant demographics and political stance.

ID	Age	Gender	Political stance
ID1	31	Male	Left
ID2	22	Female	Left
ID3	23	Female	Left
ID4	23	Female	Left
ID5	27	Trans male	Left
ID6	24	Male	Left
ID7	21	Male	Left
ID8	24	Female	Left
ID9	28	Male	Left
ID10	21	Male	Left
ID11	26	Male	Left
ID12	23	Female	Left
ID13	26	Male	Left
ID14	18	Female	Left-center
ID15	27	Male	Left-center
ID16	22	Male	Left-center
ID17	26	Female	Left-center
ID18	27	Female	Left-center
ID19	23	Female	Left-center
ID20	24	Female	Left-center
ID21	25	Female	Left-center
ID22	25	Male	Left-center
ID23	26	Male	Center
ID24	24	Female	Center
ID25	25	Male	Center
ID26	27	Female	Center
ID27	25	Male	Center
ID28	30	Female	Center
ID29	24	Male	Right-center
ID30	23	Female	Right-center
ID31	21	Male	Right-center
ID32	27	Female	Right-center
ID33	24	Male	Right-center
ID34	28	Male	Right-center
ID35	24	Male	Right-center
ID36	22	Female	Right
ID37	26	Female	Right
ID38	21	Female	Right
ID39	31	Male	Right
ID40	26	Male	Right
ID41	23	Female	Right
ID42	24	Male	Right
ID43	21	Male	Right
ID44	27	Female	Right

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

ID	Age	Gender	Political stance
ID45	23	Female	Right
ID46	22	Female	Right
ID47	22	Female	Right
ID48	22	Female	Right
ID49	23	Female	Right
ID50	26	Male	Right

data collection, the participants were asked to log out of their Facebook accounts, ensuring that, for privacy considerations, their usernames and passwords were not saved on the computer. The data were securely stored on a password-protected personal computer, cloud storage, and an external backup. The collected data included all information the study participants provided on Facebook, such as their personal profile details and activity logs. These logs offered a comprehensive, linear, and categorical overview of all activities the participants engaged in throughout the studied period, which was crucial for the analysis of their political participation and how they structured and maintained their political identity on Facebook.

Ethical considerations

Before commencing the data collection process, we had all procedures and methods reviewed and approved by the university's ethical committee, ensuring that all potential privacy concerns were adequately addressed and all ethical standards were met. We also took precautionary measures to prevent ethical challenges. Specifically, all respondents who agreed to participate in our investigation signed informed consent forms. The participants were provided with all necessary details concerning what data would be collected and how the data would be used, as well as being informed about all potential risks associated with their participation. We also provided the study participants with detailed information regarding the entire research process, its objectives, and what was expected from them. Specifically, the respondents were informed that only publicly available information was going to be taken on this research, so materials exchanged in the Facebook Messenger were not used. The participants' anonymity and privacy were ensured by not gathering any raw data that could lead to the identification of individuals. Additionally, following the guidelines set of the University's ethical standard codes for conducting research, we abode by the data protection laws provided by the country. In addition, since the research was conducted on data from a third-party platform (Facebook), the data collection process had to follow the Facebook data usage policies. We also ensured that strict measures were in place regarding protection of data from access, breaches, or misuse. The respondents were supplied with a contact list for inquiries or complaints. Finally, to avoid any kind of risk in the process, the data collection was restricted to a minimum.

Data analysis and coding reliability

The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. First, demographic data collected from the

respondents was summarized descriptively using tables and charts. Second, qualitative data on political expression on Facebook was analyzed by categorizing expressions, which were then compiled into a "coding sheet" for the subsequent quantitative analysis. We then examined the extent and frequency of different types of political expression. To this end, a research assistant first coded five browsing videos using the coding sheet and submitted the results to the lead researcher. This phase was meant to capture a wide range of data and ensure that all relevant expressions were accounted for. Furthermore, two research assistants were then selected to analyze the browsing logs of 10 participants each. Their work was reviewed by the lead researcher for accuracy and consistency, ensuring reliability of the coding process. Reliability checks were conducted by comparing the assistants' coding with that of the lead researcher, refining the criteria as necessary. Eventually, a single coder, in collaboration with the lead author, continued the remaining coding, with ongoing reliability testing as needed. To operationalize the codes, explicit standards were established for each category of political expression found on Facebook. A comprehensive code sheet was produced, defining the following four categories: "partisan vs. socio-political" for classifying content, "national related messages" for broader national topics, "indirect messages" for references to political personalities, and "direct messages" for information coming from politicians "as is." The coders received detailed instructions, including examples, on how to identify and classify content within Facebook shares, likes, comments, and posts. To ensure accurate coding, the coders were also advised to consider the context and content of each post. Ultimately, consensus was reached on all coding standards that were applied.

Results

Facebook engagement metrics

To better understand the nature of participants' interactions with partisan-political content, we analyzed their engagement through likes, comments, and shares. The summarized engagement metrics are presented in Table 2.

Likes: The average number of likes per post was 2.44. This relatively higher number indicates that participants often opted for this low-risk form of engagement. Liking a post allowed participants to express approval without making a strong public statement, aligning with the concept of a "hidden political self." This behavior suggests that users are cautious about revealing their political leanings too openly on social media.

Comments: The average number of comments per post was 0.55. This value reflects participants' reluctance to engage in deeper political

TABLE 2 Participants' engagement means.

Activity	Average frequency per post
Like	2.44
Comments	0.55
Shares	0.3

discussions. Commenting requires a higher level of commitment and exposes the user's opinion more publicly, which can be risky in a polarized environment. As one participant expressed, *"I like to show support with a like, but I avoid commenting because I do not want to get into arguments."*

Shares: The average number of shares per post was 0.3, making sharing the least common form of engagement. Sharing a post implies a strong endorsement and a desire to broadcast the content to a wider audience, which participants appeared hesitant to do. One participant noted, *"Sharing a political post feels like making a public statement, and I'm not always comfortable with that."*

These findings suggest that participants preferred passive forms of interaction, such as liking, more visible or committed actions like commenting or sharing. This cautious approach is likely influenced by the fear of social repercussions in a politically charged environment.

Partisan-political behavior

We categorized the partisan-political behavior of participants on Facebook into three primary types of engagement: Direct messages, indirect messages, and national topics discourse. The breakdown of these categories, including the number of participants involved and the total messages shared, is detailed in Table 3.

- 1 Direct messages:** This category includes direct messages shared by political factions, politicians, or elected representatives. Out of 2,323 partisan-political messages analyzed, 14 participants shared a total of 27 direct messages. This low level of direct engagement suggests that participants were cautious about openly affiliating with specific political figures or parties. For example, one participant stated, *"I do not want to seem like I'm endorsing any politician directly. It's safer to stay neutral."*
- 2 Indirect messages:** Posts categorized under this type referenced political factions or officials but were not direct communications from them. These posts originated from third-party sources, indicating a preference for indirect engagement with political content. Twenty-two participants shared a total of 45 messages in this category. One participant explained, *"I prefer to share posts from news sources rather than politicians. It feels less personal."*
- 3 National related messages:** This category encompasses posts related to broader national issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or general policy discussions. National correspondence was the most common form of partisan engagement, with 27 participants sharing 86 messages. This suggests that participants were more comfortable discussing national-level issues, which may feel less politically charged and more aligned with collective national identity. As one participant mentioned, *"Talking about national issues feels less divisive than supporting a specific party."*

TABLE 3 Partisan-political messages by engagement type.

Engagement type	No. of participants	Total N of messages	Average N of messages per participant
Direct messages	14	27	1.93
Indirect messages	22	45	2.05
National related messages	27	86	3.19

These results indicate that participants were more inclined to engage with broader, less politically charged content, often avoiding direct interaction with partisan materials. This behavior reflects a general cautiousness in openly expressing political identities on social media.

Qualitative analysis of partisan-political behavior

Further qualitative analysis revealed deeper insights into the political behavior of participants, identifying four major themes: direct political engagement, indirect engagement, national identity and pride, and concern with current affairs affecting the nation.

- 1 Direct political engagement:** An example of direct political engagement was seen in a post regarding Oren Hazan's suspension from the Knesset. A participant shared: *"Oren Hazan was suspended from the Knesset for a week due to an insult to the dignity of the Knesset. Oren Hazan said in response that he was proud of the achievement that proved, according to him, that even the honor of an institution like the Knesset can still be harmed."* This post illustrates primary resonance, where the participant directly engaged with a political figure's narrative.
- 2 Indirect engagement:** Participants often engaged indirectly by reacting to political content shared by others rather than posting their own opinions. For example, one participant commented on a third-party post about a politician's actions: *"I'm not sure I agree with everything they are doing, but this article raises some good points."* This type of interaction shows a preference for engaging in political discourse without directly affiliating with the source.
- 3 National identity and pride:** Many participants shared content related to national identity, often linking personal stories to broader national issues. For instance, one participant shared: *"My husband is a career soldier, in a demanding position, a man of values. Love of the country is his guiding light, your safety is his top priority. I am proud of him, and this is how I will educate my children."* This reflects the strong connection between personal narratives and national identity, aligning with the national correspondence category.
- 4 Concern with current affairs and national issues:** Participants frequently expressed concern about current national issues. One participant shared a post discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emphasizing unity: *"We need to find common ground and work toward peace, for the sake of our future."* This

demonstrates that national issues resonate deeply with participants, encouraging more active engagement in these discussions.

Socio-political behavior

When analyzing socio-political behavior, we categorized content by political camp and issue type, including gender, economic, religious, and LGBTQ matters. Table 4 summarizes the socio-political messages by category and political camp.

- 1 *Center camp*: Participants from the center camp displayed balanced engagement across various socio-political categories, particularly in discussions related to gender and economic issues. This indicates that the center camp is concerned with both social justice and economic stability.
- 2 *Left-Wing camp*: Participants from the left-wing camp were more vocal about social issues, especially gender and LGBTQ matters. One participant from this camp shared: “LGBTQ rights are human rights. We need to keep pushing for equality.” This reflects a strong focus on social justice causes.
- 3 *Right-Wing camp*: Surprisingly, participants from the right-wing camp showed notable involvement in LGBTQ matters, despite the camp’s traditional association with conservative values. This suggests that identity-based topics can resonate across the political spectrum. As one participant noted, “We may not agree on everything, but supporting LGBTQ rights is important for everyone.”
- 4 *Center-left and center-right camps*: These camps showed moderate levels of engagement across all socio-political categories. The center-left camp was more engaged in social issues like gender and economic matters, while the center-right camp showed the least engagement overall.

These findings suggest that younger Israelis are more inclined to engage with socio-political content that addresses broader social issues rather than strictly partisan-political topics. This preference may stem from the perception that socio-political issues have more tangible social implications and resonate more with personal values, as opposed to the divisiveness of partisan politics.

Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated how young Israeli adults engage with political and social content on Facebook, focusing on their behavior

in a highly polarized society. The first research question (RQ1) explored whether young Israelis use Facebook as a deliberative tool for partisan-political expression. Our findings indicate that while Facebook is a key platform for political engagement, the nature of this engagement is predominantly passive. Participants often interacted with partisan-political content through “likes,” a low-risk form of engagement that does not require overt political statements, rather than through more visible actions such as commenting or sharing. This cautious approach to political expression on Facebook can be understood through the Spiral of Silence theory (Kim, 2021; Rafique et al., 2023), which suggests that individuals may avoid expressing their views publicly if they fear social isolation or negative repercussions. In the Israeli context, where political divisions are deep and often fraught with tension, the stakes of openly declaring one’s political affiliations on social media are particularly high (Friedman et al., 2024). The political landscape in Israel is characterized by sharp ideological divides, particularly concerning issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the recent judicial reform attempts (“*The Judicial Overhaul*”), and the role of religion in public life (Cohen, 2024; Matusiak, 2023). In such a context, young adults may choose to engage with political content in a way that minimizes the risk of social conflict, leading to a preference for passive engagement.

The second research question (RQ2) examined whether young adults use Facebook as a deliberative tool for socio-political expression. The results suggest that participants were more comfortable engaging with socio-political issues, such as gender equality, economic stability, and LGBTQ rights, than with strictly partisan-political topics. This finding aligns with the conceptualization of socio-political participation as a form of civic engagement that focuses on advocating for social justice and protecting citizens’ rights, rather than aligning with a specific political party or candidate (Salman et al., 2017; Aixa et al., 2021). The majority of studies on online political participation focus on Western democracies, where polarization exists but manifests differently than in Israel. The Israeli political landscape is shaped by frequent elections, deep ideological divides, and the ongoing influence of national security concerns on public debate (Cohen, 2024; Friedman et al., 2024). Unlike studies from more stable democracies (Johann, 2022; Theocharis and Van Deth, 2017), this research provides a different perspective, showing how young adults navigate political expression in a society where polarization directly affects daily interactions. Our findings suggest that, compared to Western democracies young Israelis are much more cautious. Rather than openly sharing their views, they prefer low-risk engagement like “liking” posts instead of commenting or sharing. This aligns with previous studies on political self-censorship in highly divided societies (Kushin et al., 2019; Rafique et al., 2023), but also adds an important regional perspective, showing that polarization

TABLE 4 Socio-political messages by category and political camp.

Category	Total no. of messages	Left-wing camp	Centre camp	Right-wing camp	Centre-left camp	Centre-right camp
Gender issues	30	8	10	7	3	2
economic issues	20	5	6	5	3	1
Religious issues	19	6	5	4	3	1
Social/Civic Org.	18	4	6	4	2	2
LGBTQ matters	17	3	5	7	2	0

shapes not just what people believe, but how they choose to engage online. Methodologically, this study also stands out by using direct Facebook activity logs instead of relying only on self-reported surveys or interviews (Vraga et al., 2015; Johann, 2022). This approach allows for a more accurate picture of actual online behavior, avoiding common biases in self-reported data. By combining real engagement data with in-depth interviews, this study contributes both a new perspective on online political participation in highly polarized societies and a more reliable method for studying digital political behavior. These findings are consistent with broader debates in the literature regarding the role of social media in fostering political discourse. On the one hand, social media platforms like Facebook have been recognized for expanding the opportunities for political participation, particularly among younger and marginalized populations (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Ruess et al., 2023). In this regard, Literat et al. (2018) proposed a nuanced framework to assess youth digital participation by analyzing the aims, actors, and intensity of their involvement, highlighting the complexity of youth engagement in both informal and formal online communities. Social media provides a space where users can access a wide range of information, connect with others who share their interests, and engage in discussions on various social and political issues (Papagiannidis and Manika, 2016; Theocharis and Van Deth, 2017).

However, as argued by the “less-optimist” camp, social media interactions often fail to promote genuine deliberation and may even undermine democratic processes (Huckfeldt and Morehouse Mendez, 2008; Conroy et al., 2012). The platforms are frequently criticized for fostering environments where partisan and polarized views dominate, with users tending to engage within echo chambers rather than participating in meaningful discussions with those who hold opposing viewpoints (Woolley et al., 2010). This study’s findings support this perspective, as the reluctance to engage openly with partisan-political content suggests that Facebook may not be effectively facilitating the kind of deliberative political discourse necessary for a healthy democracy. Instead, the platform might be reinforcing existing political divides by encouraging users to limit their interactions to safer and less controversial forms of engagement.

The cautiousness observed in political expression among Israeli youth on Facebook may also be reflective of broader societal trends. The political instability in Israel, characterized by frequent elections and shifting leadership, has likely contributed to a sense of uncertainty and caution among young people regarding their political engagement (Cohen, 2024). Additionally, the intense polarization surrounding key issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of religion in public life, may exacerbate the reluctance to engage in overt political discussions online (Friedman et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the study highlights Facebook’s role in facilitating socio-political participation. The higher levels of engagement observed in discussions about socio-political issues suggest that Facebook may be more effective as a platform for civic engagement around shared societal concerns. This supports the view that socio-political participation on social media is more about advocating for collective moral frameworks and less about advancing partisan agendas (Salman et al., 2017; Aixa et al., 2021).

The findings also resonate with research on the digital behavior of Israeli youth, who are known for their high levels of internet and social media usage (Lee and Horsley, 2017). This demographic is particularly adept at using digital platforms for various forms of social engagement,

including activism and civic participation (Valenzuela et al., 2012; Stolle et al., 2005). However, the tendency to engage in safer, less confrontational forms of participation, as observed in this study, may reflect the broader challenges posed by the polarized and volatile political environment in Israel.

In conclusion, while Facebook serves as a platform for both political and socio-political engagement among young Israelis, the nature of this engagement is shaped by the broader political context. In highly polarized societies like Israel, the platform’s potential to foster meaningful deliberation is limited by users’ cautious approach to political expression. This sheds light on the need for further research into the factors that influence online political engagement and how social media platforms can be better designed to support open, inclusive political discourse.

To summarize, Facebook facilitates varying degrees of political participation, encompassing both direct and indirect activities. Direct engagement on the platform typically involves actions like commenting on or sharing posts related to political figures or partisan issues. These activities require a more explicit commitment to the content and a willingness to openly associate with a particular viewpoint. In contrast, indirect engagement is characterized by simpler, less time-consuming actions such as “liking” a post. This form of engagement allows users to express approval or agreement with minimal effort and without the need to engage in deeper discussion or debate.

The tendency for users to rely heavily on “likes” rather than more substantive forms of interaction suggest a preference for lower-risk participation. This aligns with prior research indicating that online political participation often aims to involve as many people as possible, but not necessarily to replace traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting or participating in debates (Kim and Hoewe, 2023; Ruess et al., 2023). The reduced willingness to engage in more in-depth discussions or provide detailed feedback on political issues highlights a cautious approach to online political expression.

In this context, users appear to be more reactive than proactive in their interactions with partisan-political content. The preference for liking over commenting or sharing indicates that while users are engaged with the content, they are less inclined to involve themselves in more critical or reflective discussions. This suggests that Facebook serves as a platform for users to signal their political alignments subtly and safely, without fully committing to more visible or potentially contentious forms of participation. Participants were found to be more engaged with socio-political content that addresses broader social issues rather than strictly partisan messages. This preference can be associated with people’s general concern for societal matters over political party discourse as well as the minor implications that may come with participation in national social issues. This is, however, hypothetical and may need further research to determine factors that motivate online engagement on socio-political issues. For instance, participants frequently share and interact with posts about social justice and community issues which imply that these topics resonate their individual interests regardless of their political alignments. In other words, the engagement with socio-political content implies that users are more interested in discussions that have tangible social implications rather than purely political debates. This trend aligns with Aixa et al.’s (2021) observation that social-political participation often addresses public problems and represents social causes which garners broader support and engagement from the public.

Limitations and implications for policymakers

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size could be considered relatively small, and participants were recruited using snowball sampling. While this method helped us reach active Facebook users, it also means that our sample might not fully represent the broader population. Second, the study focuses only on Facebook, which, although significant, is just one of many platforms where political discussions take place. Future research should explore platforms like X, TikTok, or WhatsApp, where political engagement may follow different patterns. Third, the study looks specifically at young adults in Israel, a group with unique social and political dynamics. Expanding this research to different age groups or other political environments could help determine whether these patterns hold more broadly. The study participants' passive engagement with political content posted on Facebook revealed by our data analysis suggests that younger Israelis have yet to embrace Facebook as a tool for communicating political sentiments. As evidenced by our results, socio-political content that primarily focuses on social issues elicits people's interest in engaging beyond mere party-political discourse to encompass broader societal concerns. In this regard, a recommendation that can be derived from our findings is that it is necessary to frame political messages in a way that would highlight their social impact and relevance to everyday life. Similarly, the study suggests a need for more research regarding the factors that prevent users from direct engagement with political content and designing strategies that would create safe and inclusive spaces for political expression and freedom.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Tel-Aviv University Institutional Ethics Committee. The study was conducted

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Author contributions

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