Exploring the Safety and Transparency of Social Media Platforms for Civic Engagement Among Omani Youth

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Abstract

This study investigates how Omani youth perceive the safety and transparency of social media platforms as tools for civic engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from a nationwide survey of 346 respondents aged 18–29 and three virtual focus group discussions containing 15 participants. Survey respondents were selected through random sampling to ensure representation across gender, region, and socio-economic background. Focus group participants were also randomly drawn from the survey pool and stratified by age to capture generational differences in perception and behavior. Findings indicate that while social media platforms are recognized as accessible and interactive spaces that facilitate awareness and civic expression, significant concerns persist regarding data privacy, misinterpretation, and online harassment. Informative content and user-generated media were found to foster accountability, while entertainment-driven posts and emotionally charged activism often led to polarization or disengagement. The paper calls for enhanced digital literacy, context-sensitive platform moderation policies, and institutional support for transparent digital civic spaces.

Keywords: Social media, Civic engagement, Transparency, Safety, Social accountability.

1. Introduction

Social media has become a central space for youth civic engagement, especially in contexts where traditional public discourse is limited. In Oman, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as key channels through which young people raise social issues, demand accountability, and shape public opinion. These platforms offer accessible and immediate avenues for youth expression, yet they also raise concerns about safety, credibility, and the potential repercussions of public participation (UNICEF, 2020).

Omani youth are both empowered and constrained by digital spaces. Cultural norms, surveillance concerns, and platform design affect how and when they participate in civic matters. This study aims to explore these dynamics by addressing the following research questions:

- How do Omani youth engage with social media in the context of civic accountability?

- What factors affect the sense of safety and transparency on these platforms?

- What strategies and content types are most associated with meaningful engagement?

- How do platform features influence youth trust and participation?

By answering these questions, the study provides insights that can inform platform design, policy development, and youth digital education initiatives in Oman and similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Youth Civic Engagement in Digital Spaces

the rise of digital platforms has revolutionized the scope and nature of civic engagement, especially among younger generations. These technologies have dramatically lowered traditional barriers to collective action and public participation, enabling rapid information sharing and large-scale mobilization that transcends geographical and socio-political boundaries (Tufekci, 2017). In societies where conventional civic arenas are restricted—either by socio-cultural norms or political limitations—youth have increasingly taken social media as a primary vehicle for advocacy, inclusive dialogue, and grassroots watchdog efforts (Shirky, 2011).

This shift is especially clear and complex in the Gulf region. For example, in the United Arab Emirates, El-Khalili (2013) observed that young people leveraged social platforms to voice criticisms of public services, often employing caution and strategic ambiguity to navigate regulatory sensitivities. Similarly, research in Qatar by Miladi et al. (2018) revealed that youth engagement through social media to air civic concerns has grown, yet it persistently reflects the boundaries imposed by local cultural conventions. In Oman, Al Shamsi (2015) documented a significant surge in youth-driven online activism, particularly in response to hot-button topics such as educational reform, unemployment, and broader social justice. However, self-censorship remains widespread in Oman due to vague restrictions on online expression and strong cultural norms discouraging open criticism.

Recent studies highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated digital civic participation, especially among Arab youth. Hurley (2021) noted that the pandemic period intensified the use of personal media narratives and grassroots content creation as alternative forms of civic expression, particularly among young women in the Arab world. Likewise, Greene et al. (2022) analyzed post-pandemic shifts in youth engagement patterns on platforms like Instagram, revealing how issue-based content became increasingly personalized, aestheticized, and tied to micro-influencer networks rather than institutional campaigns. These developments suggest that digital civic behavior post-2020 is marked by a blending of personal identity performance and civic messaging—a pattern that reflects both increased autonomy and greater algorithmic constraint.

Together, these trends illustrate the evolving landscape of youth digital participation, where civic expression is shaped not only by regional sociopolitical contexts but also by global digital trends that influence how young people mobilize, communicate, and construct meaning online.

2.2 Platform Trust, Safety, and Civic Risk

A critical factor shaping the effectiveness of youth civic engagement online is the degree of trust in platform governance. As Gillespie (2018) articulates, willingness to participate in digital public spheres is closely tied to perceptions of how platforms handle data privacy, content moderation, and the protection of free expression. In the Omani context, anxieties surrounding government surveillance and the unpredictable nature of social and legal responses

to online activism frequently induce selective participation, self-censorship, or even outright disengagement (Howard et al., 2011). Thus, the promise of digital engagement is continually tempered by underlying concerns over personal safety, reputational risk, and the unclear mechanisms governing digital platforms.

2.3 Content Format and Influence

The design and delivery of digital content play a critical role in shaping patterns of youth engagement with civic issues. Formats that combine informative substance with user-generated videos and interactive elements—such as comments, hashtags, and live streaming—have proven particularly effective in driving community involvement and awareness around social causes. (Brandtzæg et al., 2012) Nevertheless, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) caution that the popularity of emotionally charged or entertainment-centric posts can distort public debate, undermine message credibility, and divert attention from critical issues. This underscores an ongoing challenge for civically minded youth: striking a delicate balance between crafting accessible, engaging content and maintaining the integrity, credibility, and impact of their advocacy efforts.
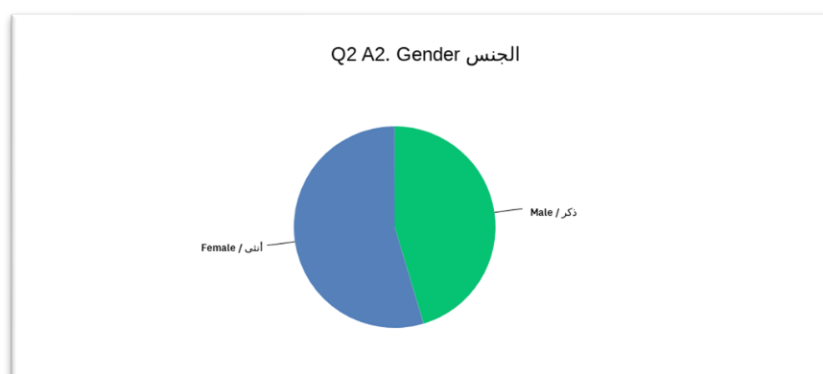
3. Methodology

3.1 Mixed-Methods Design

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design to capture the multi-dimensional perspectives of Omani youth regarding social media use and civic engagement. This design was selected to enable the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative methods, through a broad-based survey, offered generalizable patterns and statistical insights into youth behavior, while qualitative data from focus group discussions provided contextualized understanding of the motivations, concerns, and emotional drivers behind those behaviors. The integration of both approaches enabled triangulation of findings, which enhances validity and produces a more nuanced account than either method alone could provide (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). This was particularly appropriate for the Omani context, where digital civic engagement is shaped by complex cultural, political, and emotional dimensions not easily captured through surveys alone.

3.2 Quantitative Phase

The quantitative component involved administering an online survey via the SurveyMonkey platform. A total of 346 respondents, all Omani citizens aged between 18 and 29, participated in the survey. The sample was balanced in terms of gender distribution (45.38% male, 54.62% female) and captured a wide range of educational, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure broad representation of Omani youth perspectives. The survey instrument explored key domains such as patterns of social media usage, attitudes toward civic engagement, and perceived barriers to participation.

3.3 Qualitative Phase

To provide depth and context to the survey findings, the qualitative phase consisted of three virtual focus group discussions conducted on Google Meet. Each session brought together five participants, grouped by the following age ranges: 18–20, 21–24, and 25–29 years. Participants were selected using random sampling from the larger survey pool to ensure diverse and unbiased representation. This stratification enabled the research to examine age-specific differences and capture varied viewpoints within the youth group. The focus groups encouraged interactive discussion, prompting participants to reflect on their lived experiences, share examples, and elaborate on nuances related to advocacy, online risks, and content preferences. Data from the discussions were analyzed using manual thematic analysis and open coding, conducted by the primary researcher familiar with the cultural and contextual dynamics of the study population.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical best practices were central throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. All data were securely stored and accessed exclusively for the purposes of this study, in compliance with principles of responsible and ethical research. These measures were designed to promote participant trust and ensure the integrity of the research process.

4. Results

4.1 Engagement Patterns

Survey findings revealed exceptionally high daily social media usage among Omani youth, with 91.3% of respondents reporting daily engagement, indicating deep digital integration and platform familiarity. However, active civic participation remains limited: only 19.65% disclosed that they "always" engage with social or accountability-related content, while 48.55% reported doing so "occasionally," and 23.7% admitted to rarely or never participating. This pronounced gap between global social media use and lower active civic engagement was substantiated by focus group data. Several participants articulated a pattern of habitual, yet passive, consumption:

"I use social media daily, but rarely for accountability. I mostly watch." (Informant A4)"I don't interact unless it's something that directly affects me or my family." (Informant C2)

4.2 Motivations and Barriers

Youth engagement with civic content on social media is closely tied to personal relevance and emotional impact. The qualitative findings reveal that Omani youth are most likely to participate in online civic discourse when an issue feels directly connected to their lived experiences or stirs strong emotions—particularly frustration, anger, or moral concern. Rather than engaging consistently or abstractly, most participants described a pattern of selective engagement, triggered by moments that felt personally significant or unjust.

Several focus group participants described how witnessing acts of perceived unfairness—such as unqualified individuals receiving employment opportunities—prompted them to voice their concerns online:

"When I saw unqualified people getting jobs unfairly, it made me speak up." (Informant A1)

"I only speak when something feels wrong or painful. Otherwise, I just scroll." (Informant B3)

These emotional triggers—often tied to personal or community grievances—served as entry points for civic participation. In this context, civic engagement becomes reactive rather than sustained, driven by immediate emotional responses to perceived injustices.

The survey results further support this pattern. While 38.15% of respondents indicated that they used social media to share information about social issues, and 19.08% reported participating in online civic discussions, a significant portion—31.21%—had never engaged in any form of civic activity online. This suggests that although awareness and platform access are high, actual participation is often episodic and uneven.

In addition to emotional motivation, perceived risks played a major role in shaping youth behavior online. Many focus group participants expressed concerns about being misinterpreted, publicly criticized, or targeted for their views. The fear of online backlash—particularly in a cultural environment that values social harmony and indirect communication—was repeatedly mentioned as a reason for remaining silent:

"Even if you mean well, people twist your words. That's risky." (Informant B2)

Together, these findings highlight a fundamental tension: while emotional intensity can prompt youth to engage with civic issues online, the lack of psychological safety and social clarity often discourages sustained or visible participation. As a result, civic expression tends to be cautious, selective, and largely confined to issues that resonate on a personal level.

4.3 Platform Features and Transparency

While 58.67% of survey respondents agreed that social media platforms can play a role in holding public institutions accountable, qualitative data revealed that trust in these platforms is often conditional. Specifically, participants expressed that the effectiveness of mechanisms such as hashtags and comment sections depends heavily on the sensitivity of the issue and the perceived likelihood that the content will reach a wide audience. Civic engagement was not based on blind trust in platform features, but rather on strategic assessment of whether a message would gain traction and prompt a response.

Focus group participants shared concrete examples of how specific features influenced outcomes. Hashtags, in particular, were seen as powerful tools when used effectively. One participant explained:

"Hashtags made the diploma issue go viral. The ministry finally responded." (Informant A3)

Others highlighted the dual nature of comment sections, which can both foster dialogue and expose users to hostility:

"The comment section is powerful. It creates pressure, but it also attracts trolls." (Informant B1)

These insights suggest that while digital tools have the potential to amplify civic concerns, youth engage with them carefully, weighing risks and anticipated outcomes before speaking out.4.4 Informative vs. Entertaining Content

Over 55% of participants agreed that informative content is most likely to foster accountability online, yet focus groups highlighted a central dilemma: while factual content formats have higher credibility, entertaining or emotionally charged formats (e.g., memes, humorous videos) receive greater visibility and emotional resonance—often at the expense of substantive impact:

"Funny videos get more views, but no one remembers the message." (Informant C3)"When I share infographics, people ignore them. But memes spread fast." (Informant B4)

This dynamic suggests that Omani youth are attuned to how social media algorithms amplify certain types of content and subsequently tailor their own engagement strategies to maximize reach, even if this sometimes means compromising depth or message durability.

4.5 Emotional and Cognitive Load

Qualitative findings revealed an emotional-cognitive tension that shapes how Omani youth engage with civic content online. Emotional triggers—particularly feelings of injustice, exclusion, or frustration—often prompt initial acts of engagement, such as posting, sharing, or commenting. These emotions serve as powerful motivators, encouraging youth to speak out impulsively or in moments of heightened concern. However, this engagement is frequently followed by hesitation, regret, or withdrawal due to the perceived risks of misinterpretation, criticism, or reputational harm.

"You get angry and post, but later you regret it or delete it." (Informant A2)

In parallel, the cognitive demands of responsible digital participation—especially the need to verify information and anticipate possible backlash—can deter consistent involvement. Many participants expressed fatigue with fact-checking and second-guessing their posts, often choosing to disengage entirely:

"Verifying things before sharing takes time. Sometimes, I just don't bother." (Informant B5)

This emotional-cognitive cycle—marked by bursts of expression followed by silence—illustrates why civic engagement online is often inconsistent and selective. Survey data reinforced this pattern: only 17.16% of respondents strongly agreed that social media platforms offer a safe space for civic participation, highlighting persistent concerns about psychological exposure and social consequences in the digital public sphere.

4.6 Trust, Interaction, and Authority

Youth perceptions of social media as a tool for civic accountability are strongly shaped by the degree of interactivity these platforms offer. Survey data show that 52.5% of respondents believe interactive features—such as tagging, commenting, and direct messaging—enable meaningful engagement with decision-makers. However, qualitative insights suggest that while the potential for responsiveness exists, it is unevenly experienced and often unpredictable.

Some participants recounted instances where online engagement led to concrete action:

"Once we tagged the municipality about waste. They replied and cleaned up." (Informant C1)

Such experiences reinforced a sense of efficacy and validated the use of social media for community-level problem-solving. However, others reported repeated attempts at engagement that went unanswered, fostering disillusionment:

"I tag officials but never get any reaction. It's like screaming into a void." (Informant A5)

These contrasting experiences point to a gap between the theoretical promise of digital engagement and its practical, consistent realization in the Omani context. While interactive features can facilitate accountability in isolated cases, the lack of institutional responsiveness undermines trust in social media as a reliable channel for civic participation.

4.7 User-Generated Content and Personal Influence

Both survey and focus group data highlight the value Omani youth place on personal narratives and user-generated content. Participants consistently expressed those individual voices—especially those conveyed through firsthand experiences or informal videos—are more credible and emotionally resonant than institutional messaging. This preference stems from a broader desire for authenticity and relatability in civic discourse:

"When people post videos of themselves explaining an issue, it feels real. Not propaganda." (Informant C5)

"Even if you're just a student, your voice matters when others share it." (Informant B1)

Such content is perceived as more trustworthy, fostering a sense of empowerment and ownership among youth. It allows them to frame issues in their own words and contribute meaningfully to public dialogue, even without formal status or institutional backing.

However, this sense of agency is tempered by self-awareness. Youth often engage in careful self-presentation, knowing that even genuine expression can be misunderstood or invite criticism. The perceived risks of being publicly exposed or socially judged lead many to censor or moderate their digital voice, especially on sensitive topics.

Taken together, these findings reflect a digitally literate and socially conscious youth population that is both eager to engage and aware of the limitations imposed by their environment. Their participation is shaped by a complex interplay of internal motivation, emotional responsiveness, digital platform features, content format, and sociocultural boundaries. These factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they converge to define when, how, and why youth participate—or refrain from participating—in civic discourse online.

5. Discussion

This study provides nuanced insight into the complex patterns of social accountability engagement among Omani youth in digital spaces. The findings highlight how, despite near-universal daily use of social media, there exists a significant gap between passive consumption and active participation in civic discourse. This echoes prior research on youth digital engagement in the Gulf, where sociopolitical structures, ambiguous boundaries of permissible speech, and cultural sensitivities shape the limits and affordances of online advocacy (El-Khalili, 2013; Al-Kuwari, 2018; Al-Shamsi, 2015).

Platform Familiarity vs. Civic Engagement

While a remarkable 91.3% of respondents report daily social media use, only a fifth consistently engage with content related to social issues. The qualitative accounts reveal that genuine civic participation often hinges on direct personal relevance or emotional resonance—youth are most likely to contribute actively when issues evoke injustice or directly affect their lives or communities. This aligns with findings that strong emotional triggers are often required to convert passive users into active participants, but the threshold for such engagement remains high due to various disincentives.

Personal Motivation and Barriers

The study exposes personal motivation as a pivotal determinant of engagement: emotional triggers like outrage over unfairness propel youth to voice concerns online. Yet emotional commitment is tempered by considerable barriers, notably a fear of misunderstanding, social misjudgment, or backlash. Concerns over being misinterpreted or facing reputational consequences often lead to self-censorship or withdrawal from civic conversations, reflecting a broader Gulf trend of managing personal risk in online spaces (Howard et al., 2011).

Platform Features, Transparency, and Trust

Interactive features such as hashtags and comments are valued for their potential to amplify accountability and influence public institutions, as evidenced by successful campaigns around high-profile issues. However, there is a persistent skepticism regarding the consistency and effectiveness of these features. While some youth have witnessed tangible responses from institutions, others perceive their engagement as futile or ignored, revealing a "credibility gap" between affordances and actual outcomes. Trust in platform governance remains fragile; concerns about data privacy, surveillance, and opaque moderation reduce confidence in using these tools for meaningful civic action (Gillespie, 2018).

Content Format: Attention, Credibility, and Influence

Another central tension highlighted is between the reach of entertaining or emotionally charged content and the depth or impact of substantive, informative material. While memes, satirical videos, and humorous posts attract greater attention from peers and are more likely to go viral, their underlying messages—often concerning social accountability—are less likely to be retained or acted upon. Conversely, fact-based infographics and earnest calls for reform, despite being perceived as credible, are less likely to achieve traction in fast-moving digital environments shaped by algorithmic preferences.

Emotional and Cognitive Costs

The research also reveals the emotional and cognitive labor associated with digital civic engagement. While strong emotions fuel engagement, the necessity of constant fact-checking, fear of online backlash, and subsequent "engagement regret" contribute to cognitive overload and even burnout. Youth described oscillating between anger-driven posts and later hesitance or deletion, reflecting a cycle common in socio-politically sensitive contexts.

Authenticity, Personal Narratives, and Agency

Despite cautious engagement, Omani youth perceive user-generated content and authentic personal narratives as having significant influence. Individual stories—especially when shared by ordinary youth rather than influencers or organizations—are seen as more relatable, credible, and trustworthy. This authenticity provides youth with a sense of agency; however, the persistent backdrop of surveillance, misinterpretation, and societal judgment necessitates a guarded approach to digital participation.

Synthesis and Implications

These patterns underscore a digitally knowledge generation acutely aware of both the possibilities and constraints of leveraging social media for civic good. Digital literacy appears robust, with youth understanding and navigating the mechanics of algorithmic promotion and credibility, yet meaningful participation is continually negotiated in tension with contextual barriers of risk, cultural norms, and fluctuating institutional responsiveness.

To improve civic participation and accountability, the study highlights the need for combined efforts from different sides:

- Strengthening digital literacy education around content evaluation, emotional regulation, and digital rights;
- Enhancing platform transparency and safety mechanisms to build trust and protect young users;
- Tailoring civic content to blend substantive, culturally-sensitive information with engaging formats; and
- Encouraging authentic youth-driven storytelling that balances agency with awareness of potential social and legal consequences.

Overall, the findings indicate that while Omani youth demonstrate both willingness and capability to engage in social accountability through social media, their participation is shaped by a complex set of interrelated factors. Engagement is not constant or guaranteed; rather, it is contingent upon internal drivers such as emotional resonance and personal relevance (RQ1), as well as strategic decisions about content format and narrative framing (RQ3). Moreover, the level of trust youth place in digital platforms is mediated by their perceptions of safety, credibility, and transparency, all of which are influenced by broader sociocultural norms and institutional responses (RQ2, RQ4). The interaction between these variables reveals that digital civic participation among Omani youth is highly calculated, often selective, and constrained by both visible and invisible boundaries. To unlock the full potential of youth-led social accountability in Oman's digital sphere, future policies and civic initiatives must adopt a multi-dimensional approach—addressing emotional, cultural, technological, and regulatory conditions that currently shape and limit engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Omani youth perceive and navigate issues of safety and transparency when using social media for civic engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach that included survey data from 346 participants and focus group insights from 15 individuals, the findings highlight several key dynamics shaping youth interaction with digital civic spaces.

Informative and user-generated content emerged as essential in raising awareness and amplifying civic concerns. Participants valued content perceived as authentic and relatable, especially when addressing local issues. Interactive features—such as hashtags and comment sections—enabled discussion and collective expression, although their effectiveness varied by issue sensitivity and platform responsiveness.

Despite these affordances, major barriers persist. Fear of surveillance, reputational harm, misinterpretation, and online backlash limited open participation. While emotional triggers often initiated engagement, many youth reported cognitive fatigue and skepticism about its long-term impact.

To strengthen youth civic participation in digital spaces, the following strategic actions are most urgent:

- Integrate digital literacy education into school and university programs, focusing on online civic responsibility, critical media skills, and digital self-protection.
- Develop clear national guidelines that protect freedom of expression online while addressing safety and cultural sensitivity, helping youth participate without fear.
- Enhance platform accountability by improving transparency in content moderation and offering tools adapted to local cultural contexts.

These targeted efforts can create safer, more transparent, and more supportive environments for youth civic engagement in Oman and similar contexts.

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