

How Active and Passive Social Media Engagement on Facebook and Instagram Shapes Democratic Attitudes Among Users in Slovakia

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Abstract: *Social media play an important role in the dissemination of political information and in political dialogue among agents, agencies and citizens. We study the effects of social media on democratic attitudes. Our analysis proceeds in two phases. First, we examine the effect of using eight social media platforms on support for democracy and liberal democratic principles. Second, we test the relationships between the intensity of six types of online political engagement on Facebook and Instagram and democratic attitudes. We employ linear and ordinal logistic regression analysis on a representative sample of 1,502 Slovak citizens aged 18 and older. We report three key findings: First, users of social media are not less supportive of democracy or liberal democratic principles. Second, passive political engagement on Facebook undermines support for liberal democratic principles. Third, active political engagement on both Facebook and Instagram is related to higher support for democracy as a regime but not for its liberal principles. In addition to the results on the effects of specific participatory activities, our study contributes by highlighting the need to differentiate between various types of democratic attitudes, different types of participation and different types of social media.*

Keywords: *social media, democracy, political engagement, Facebook, Instagram*

Introduction

This article focuses on social media and the role they play in shaping attitudes toward democracy. Performance theories suggest that attitude formation reflects rational calculations in decision-making processes, including judgments about

political systems such as democracy. The ‘filters’ individuals use to reflect on objective agency performance are varied; however, academic literature emphasises the role played by information provided by the media. Communication channels may trigger informed decision-making processes and, therefore, influence moral judgments or assessments of trustworthiness (Norris 2002).

Recently, social media have become an important part of online news distribution and consumption (Newman et al. 2021), serving as crucial tools for sharing political information (Bhagat & Kim 2023) and providing easily accessible platforms for political dialogue (interactions with agents, agencies and horizontal communication). From this perspective, social media offer ample opportunities for studying new channels for transferring citizens’ inputs into policymaking and for analysing modern tools for political communication and participation.

On the other hand, social media platforms are also seen as vehicles for spreading disinformation and misinformation, which can distort public discourse and undermine trust in democratic institutions. This manipulation ranges from targeted disinformation campaigns that can influence voter behaviour to the broader dissemination of false information that can polarise public opinion and disrupt democratic dialogue. Concerns arise from pathologies associated with social network communication, including fake news, filter bubbles, echo chambers, hate speech, the rapid spread of false information and selective exposure (Shin et al. 2018; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017; Chetty & Alathur 2018; Soroush et al. 2018; Fuchs 2018). These phenomena contribute to declining trust, increased polarisation and the rise of populist and authoritarian figures (Vaidhyanathan 2022; Morelock & Narita 2021).

However, given the diverse content on social media and varied consumer practices, the question of how social media precisely shape political attitudes remains a pertinent and open inquiry that we aim to explore in this article. This study focuses on two social media platforms – Facebook and Instagram. Although these platforms were originally designed for different uses, they have become the most widely used platforms (Hootsuite 2019; Garcia et al. 2020), making it difficult for politicians to avoid using them. In principle, both platforms allow for similar types of interaction: passive reception of political content, sharing and commenting on political content created by others, or publishing one’s own (audio-visual) political content. Consequently, many national studies have recently focused on these two platforms (Alcott et al. 2024; Pierri 2023; Vargo 2020; Garcia et al. 2020).

In terms of analysis, we employ various regression analytical techniques to test the relationships between social media exposure and online political engagement on one hand and democratic attitudes on the other hand. Our analysis uses data collected in February 2024 by a professional agency with a representative sample of Slovak citizens over 18 years of age. The sample size

is 1,502 respondents. Our contribution is twofold. First, our findings show that the impact of online political engagement with social media may have both positive and negative effects depending on the particular social media platform and type of activity. We also demonstrate that the effect of social media as platforms on democratic attitudes is much lower than the effect of political elites in undermining democratic principles – albeit rhetorically. Second, our findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between different types of social media and modes of engagement since lumping them together can devalue outcomes and obscure real-world impacts.

The structure of the paper is as follows: After the introduction, we present the main theoretical arguments regarding how social media may impact democratic attitudes and which mechanisms we can expect to play a role. In the methodological section, we present data and analytical techniques employed to test our hypotheses. Subsequently, the empirical section reveals our findings. In the discussion section, we suggest potential explanations and interpretations of our findings as well as avenues and challenges for future research.

The interplay between social media and democratic attitudes

Conceptualising Democratic Attitudes

What constitutes pro-democratic attitudes is debatable and largely depends on the specific conceptualisation of democracy. Accordingly, constructing a valid measurement of attitudes supporting democracy presents a considerable challenge. Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) contend that survey questions explicitly employing the term ‘democracy’ may elicit socially desirable responses, as respondents might idealise democracy without necessarily internalising democratic values.

Contemporary scholarly research provides extensive data on citizen endorsement of the abstract notion of democracy; however, there exists a notable gap in our understanding of what democracy signifies to ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, measurements of attitudes toward democracy based on support for the existing system (so-called ‘diffuse support’) and/or support for individual officeholders and the outputs from the system (‘specific support’) are still widely used, e.g. in comparative research surveys like the World Values Survey, the European Values Survey or surveys by the Pew Research Center.

An alternative approach to capturing popular attitudes toward democracy is rooted in the conceptualisation of democracy as liberal democracy. This aligns with diffuse support for a democratic regime and reflects the two pillars of liberal democracy: the electoral pillar based on citizen representation and majority rule, and the constitutional pillar encompassing institutional checks and balances to limit executive power and protect minorities. However, the battery of

questions that would appropriately capture the principles of liberal democracy remains open for debate. Van der Brug et al. (2021) argue that encompassing all principles of liberal democracy would be too broad an approach that ‘does not tap into the core of liberal democracy, which is putting institutional constraints on executive power’ (2021: 539). They narrow the operationalisation of liberal democratic attitudes to focus on the constitutional pillar, which introduces checks and balances to limit the power of elected politicians and thereby safeguard citizens from ‘majority tyranny’. ‘Support for the principles of liberal democracy implies that one accepts the fact that rights of minorities or individuals can sometimes prevail over majority opinions’ (2021: 539). In this view, liberal democratic attitudes align with the need for executive power to be constrained and support for fundamental rights of minorities and individuals’ protection through institutional checks and balances. Conversely, illiberal democratic attitudes – widespread even in countries that fulfill the criteria of liberal democracies – manifest as a rejection of the legitimacy of institutions (e.g. constitutional courts) that impose constraints on executive power and potentially limit majority tyranny (van Hauwaert & van Kessel 2018), along with a rejection of minority protection.

Empirical evidence suggests that attitudes toward democracy vary significantly based on its operationalisation, ranging from high support for ‘democracy’ as a regime to low support for liberal democracy measured through its constitutional pillar. Therefore, when investigating the impact of social media on democratic attitudes, we consider it useful to test indicators from both ends of this spectrum.

The role of social media

There are many definitions of social media, with many sharing a consensus that they are internet-based platforms for mass personal communication that facilitate interactions among users and derive their value primarily from user-generated content (van Bavel et al. 2024; Carr & Hayes 2015). As such, social media encompass various platforms including social networks like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and others. Despite distinct features inherent in various platforms and applications, scholars commonly employ overarching terms like ‘social media’ or ‘digital media’ in their examinations; we will use ‘social media’ in this article accordingly.

Digital technologies contribute to shaping, transforming and challenging ideas and institutions such as democracy or fundamental rights. However, they serve only as one agent among many in these transformations. As Botero Arcila and Griffin point out, digital technology influences society through its affordances – meaning that ‘different technologies make certain actions and interactions easier or harder to perform. All things being equal, things that are

easier to do given particular affordances are likelier to be done, while harder things are less likely' (2023: 19). In the case of social media, the affordance of acquiring and disseminating information – as well as creating and maintaining contacts – has changed significantly.

At the beginning of the millennium, internet possibilities were viewed mainly positively regarding their impact on democracy. Scholars argued that the internet would facilitate a new form of information production based on decentralisation and diversity. They also saw potential for internet platforms to serve as deliberative forums strengthening civic engagement among citizens. Later, concerns about negative effects of digital technologies on democracy began to emerge.

The literature shows that social media have a significant impact on democracy; however, these effects are complex. The evaluation heavily depends on political context. What may destabilise established democracies (e.g. spreading distrust toward political institutions) can benefit emerging democracies by strengthening opposition against authoritarian regimes. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) identified six key factors influencing democracy: participation, political knowledge, trust, polarisation, populism and echo chambers. Their systematic overview revealed that while social media have positive effects on democracy due to their potential to increase participation and political knowledge, three other factors are detrimental to democracy in Western societies. In other words, studies they reviewed confirmed that as social media use increases, so do polarisation, populism and online tribalism. All these phenomena undermine tolerance, respect for minorities and consensus-based politics – important attributes of democracy – while also increasing the potential deterioration of the constitutional pillar of liberal democracy encompassing institutional checks and balances to limit executive power and protect minorities. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

- *Exposure to social networks decreases support for democracy in general (H1a), as well as for principles of liberal democracy (H1b).*

If we delve deeper, we can identify several mechanisms operating through social media that influence democratic attitudes. Scholars have highlighted the potential for political attitudes to be altered or shaped through both firsthand experiences (Banducci & Karp 2003; Mattes & Bratton 2007) and mediated experiences (Lelkes 2016). Direct or firsthand experiences may stem from participation in political processes such as engaging in elections or participating in deliberative activities while directly observing government performance. This approach is grounded in learning-by-doing principles positing that political participation or civic engagement can empower citizens by contributing to perceptions of regime efficacy while fostering appreciation for democratic principles such as political accountability and consensus-building.

Indirect or mediated experiences occur through intermediaries such as following political issues in media contexts where individuals learn not only about specific cases or politicians but also gain insights into democratic practices and procedures.

We start from the assumption that our independent variable – social media – represents an infrastructure that facilitates the shaping of political attitudes through both channels. Firstly, individuals utilise social media to consume political news (mediated experience), while secondly providing spaces for online political participation (direct experience). Consequently, we posit that influence from social media on the formation of political attitudes should be evident. In the next section we explore more details regarding research on the influence of both forms of social media engagement – passive (news exposure) and active – on democratic attitude formation.

Impact mechanisms: passives media engagement

Social media access may affect political knowledge by increasing exposure to both true and false content. While there is mixed evidence suggesting a potential benefit for democracy, a concurrent accumulation of studies highlights a growing body of evidence indicating a detrimental effect on democracy.

Arguments for the democratising potential of social media point to an increase in political knowledge and diversity of news exposure, especially compared to regular media. Social media bring forth additional information sources, contributing to a better-informed public (Price 2013). It increases exposure to politically relevant information, diversifies sources and viewpoints, and enables dialogue and democratic participation as alternatives to traditional forms (Boulianne 2015). This was exemplified by the early events of the Arab Spring, demonstrating its impact on interest articulation outside conventional democratic channels (Lutz & Toit 2014).

On the other hand, empirical evidence often showcases the detrimental impact of social media on democratic processes, failing to fulfill optimistic ideas about democracy's positive transformation. Concerns arise from pathologies associated with social network communication, more specifically from distorted perceptions including fake news, filter bubbles, echo chambers, hate speech, rapid spread of false information and selective exposure (Shin et al. 2018; Pariser 2011; Sustain 2017; Chetty & Alathur 2018; Soroush et al. 2018; Fuchs 2018). 'Filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011) or 'echo chambers' (Sunstein 2001) in particular reinforce existing biases and online tribalism, making it difficult for individuals to engage with competing perspectives (see Vicario et al. 2019).

According to recent scholarship, the echo chamber effect strongly depends on the digital media in question. There was no evidence of echo chambers in studies looking at the internet on its own, for example, but they do seem to

emerge within social media networks where, through their isolation and possible radicalisation, they also have a negative influence on democracy (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). Moreover, passive users of social media are more prone to be exposed to such an effect. The passive users of social media are mainly defined as those who only consume social media. Gainous et al. (2020) call such users ‘lurkers’. They remain outside the conversation and simply follow other users’ news feeds and status updates. Transferred to the political domain, such activities are comparable to news consumption (exposure) in the offline world.

The concept of the echo chamber is based on a theory of selective exposure which explains that users intentionally choose information which is in congruence with their views while avoiding the information that distorts it. Social media algorithms contribute to the selective consumption with an optimised offer. While the original theory of selective exposure built on traditional media environment was mainly focused on the demand side, social networks might reinforce the selective bias on both the demand and output sides of information consumption. Thus, when social media become a primary source of political news for citizens, their echo chamber effect might contribute to polarisation by locking a social media user into an information trap that minimalises different perspectives (potential for critical thinking) on the issue. From such an angle, digital media are seen as a ‘self-learning vehicle to indoctrination, to radicalisation, to shaming, and discrimination’ (Kaunert, de Deus Pereira & Edwards 2022: 53).

Due to these predispositions of social media, the exposure may lead users to adopt more extreme attitudes or views that align with their initial ideology. Based on these assumptions, we assume that passive engagement with social networks for consumption of political news decreases support for democracy in general, as well as for principles of liberal democracy.

- *The more intense the passive engagement with social media, the lower the support for democracy in general (H2a), and for liberal-democratic principles (H2b).*

Impact mechanisms: active social media engagement

The use of social media can be considered political participation if it attempts to affect the outcomes of political institutions or their structures (Brady 1999; Sairambay 2020). Some activities like online petitions, online organisation of protests or political campaigns are obviously considered political participation. Other activities, like ‘digitally native activism’ (Li, Bernard & Luczak-Roesch 2021), which can take the form of online movements aiming to counter online disinformation and hate speech by campaigning to withdraw advertising from certain websites, borders civic engagement and political participation.

The academic discussions on political participation in a digital environment revolve around the question of what kind of activity should be considered 'participation' (Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Ruess et al. 2023). Some forms of online participation require minimal activity, leading authors to dismiss them as mere clicktivism (Morozov 2011) or 'feel-good forms of political participation' (Vitak et al. 2010). Consequently, they are considered insufficiently legitimate for use as participation due to a perceived lack of ability to effect change. Others advocate for broader definitions encompassing various contemporary forms of engagement (Norris 2002; Theocharis 2015; Pickard 2020).

In the previous section, we focused on passive use of social media like reading political news or visiting political websites (similar to media exposure in the offline world). Active use of social media 'refers to activities that facilitate direct exchange with others' (Verduyn et al. 2017: 281). This includes posting articles to the user's news feed, giving feedback by way of writing comments on posts and engaging in debate and discussion with others on the platform (Gainous et al. 2020). Some scholars would not consider such expressive engagement to be political participation as it does not necessarily aim at influencing government policies and structures (e.g. Verba et al. 1995). However, Norris (2002: 16) expands the political participation definition to include 'any dimensions of activity that are either designed directly... or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior'. Also, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) include discussions and the expressive mode in their categorisation of participation even if they consider them *passive engagement* (in contrast to *active participation*). In line with other scholars, we find the term 'passive' for online discussion and expression somewhat misleading, as these activities require heightened levels of attention and engagement (Reuss et al. 2023) and they clearly fit into understanding political participation as a dyadic concept. Therefore, rather than labelling all discursive and expressive activities on social networks non-participation, we argue that it is necessary to distinguish between these activities. We consider those that go beyond clickivism and use argumentation in formulating an opinion/impetus to influence political institutions or civil society to be manifestations of an active engagement or an active mode of political participation. While liking a status on Facebook might hardly change any policy or pattern of social behaviour, writing a blog or participating in an online discussion might have effects similar to writing a letter to a politician in the offline world.

Political participation, especially its active forms, plays an important role in civic socialisation and proper functioning of democracy. The possibility of political participation via online media promotes the mobilisation of voters and voter turnout, which strengthens the democratic legitimacy of governments and parliaments (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). Moreover, Carole Pateman's participatory theory of democracy posits that citizen political participation serves

an educational function, influencing individuals' opportunities to impact the political system and decisions, thereby enhancing the democratic legitimacy of outcomes. Furthermore, participation contributes to personal growth, psychological aspects of personality and the acquisition of skills related to democratic procedures. Pateman argues that participation also serves an integrating function, fostering acceptance, cooperation and group harmony among individuals engaged in collective decision-making (Pateman 1970: 63). This perspective emphasises the broader effects of participation on values, socialisation and democratic attitudes. The affordances of social media offer new opportunities for political activism, community formation, self-expression and access to information.

Scholars also anticipated social networks fostering relationships between citizens and their representatives, potentially boosting political trust. Deseriis (2021) notes that by lowering participation costs and facilitating cooperation, these platforms modernise representation along different dimensions: monitoring constituents' opinions (responsiveness), enhancing transparency (accountability) and encouraging collaboration on political initiatives (collaboration). Some even propose that on social media politicians and citizens can establish direct relationships, which would be characterised by interactive communication and mutual learning (Graham & Schwanholz 2020; Coleman 2017).

Based on the theoretical assumptions discussed above, we assume that:

- *The more intense the active engagement with social media for political participation, the higher the support for democracy in general (H3a) and also for liberal-democratic principles (H3b).*

Data and variables

Our analysis is based on representative survey data from Slovak citizens aged 18 and older. The sample includes 1,502 respondents, selected using quota sampling. Quotas were established based on gender (48.1% men, 51.9% women), age (ranging from 18 to 87 years old, with a mean age of 47.52 years), education (13.2% with primary or incomplete primary education, 24.4% with secondary education without a diploma, 38.5% with secondary education with a diploma and 23.9% with higher education), as well as the size of residence and region. Data collection was conducted by the professional agency FOCUS between 12 and 22 February 2024.

Support for democracy was measured as a level of agreement with one of the opposite statements, where Statement A posited that Slovakia should abandon the ideals of democracy and introduce iron fist rule, and Statement B posited that the democracy may not be perfect, but is the best form of government for our country. The four-point scale offered options: i) totally agree with statement A,

ii) tend to agree with statement A, iii) tend to agree with statement B, iv) totally agree with statement B.

In addition to the general support for democracy there were an additional three pairs of statements addressing a few of the core liberal democratic principles (constitutional pillar): minority rights protection, right for association and equality of rights. Attitudes captured by these three statements were combined in a composite index expressing support for liberal democratic principles. Exact wording (English translation) of the statements is in Table 1.

Table 1: Statements used as dependent variables

Democratic Principles	Statement A:	Statement B:
Support for democracy:	It would be good for Slovakia to abandon the ideals of democracy as soon as possible and rule with a heavy hand	Although democracy is not perfect, it is the best form of government for our country
Pair 1:	In a democracy, the rights of minorities must be consistently respected	In a democracy, the majority has the right to make decisions even at the expense of minorities
Pair 2:	The Slovak Republic should guarantee equal rights to all citizens, regardless of their nationality	Slovaks should have a decisive position in the Slovak Republic
Pair 3:	Non-governmental organisations help to develop democracy and civil society in Slovakia.	Non-governmental organisations are under foreign influence and act against the interests of Slovakia.

Source: Authors

Online political engagement was measured in the following way. First, respondents were shown a list of social media platforms and asked to answer which ones they use. Subsequently we asked them ‘How often do you perform the following activities on the social network... (name inserted)?’ The indicators for passive political engagement with social media were:

- I read posts that are related to the social / political situation (news exposure)
- I give a like to posts that are related to the social / political situation (clicktivism)

The indicators for active political engagement with social media were:

- I comment on posts that are related to the social / political situation
- I share posts that are related to the social / political situation
- I create, add my own statuses that are related to the social / political situation
- I add photos or videos that are related to the social / political situation

Respondents marked the intensity with which they perform each individual activity. There were seven options ranging from several times a day to never.

As key control variables we included two items measuring offline political participation and two items measuring political trust. The offline participation helps to control for a degree of activism and interest in politics. The political trust allows controlling for partisanship and to certain degree also for political polarisation of respondents. As for offline participation, the question asks whether respondents cast a vote in the most recent parliamentary election (yes/no) and whether they took part in any of the numerous protests that took place prior to the data collection (yes/no). In regard to political trust, we included items measuring the level of trust to both Prime Minister Robert Fico (Smer/Direction – Slovak Social Democracy), and the opposition leader Michal Šimečka (Progressive Slovakia). In addition to this, we also included standard socio-demographic variables (gender, education, age, size of residence) as control.

Analytical method

The choice of analytical method for testing our hypotheses was driven by the nature of the dependent variables. First, support for democracy is measured as a closeness to one of the opposite statements on a 4-point scale, which is an ordinal scale. Second, support for liberal democratic principles is a composite index calculated from three items measured on 4-point scale, which makes it a continuous variable.

For the hypotheses that include support for democracy we opt for ordinal logistic regression, which is a relatively powerful statistical technique used in social sciences to model relationships between an ordinal dependent variable and one or more independent variables. This technique takes into account that the intervals between the categories are not necessarily equal. Ordinal logistic regression is also suitable in our situation as we include multiple predictors that are both categorical and continuous variables.

The reported coefficients obtained from ordinal logistic regression have a straightforward interpretation: they represent the odds ratios of being in a higher versus a lower category of the dependent variable for a one-unit change in the predictor. This interpretation aligns well with the ordered nature of the dependent variable and provides clear insights into the effects of the predictors (Agresti 2010; Long & Freese 2014).

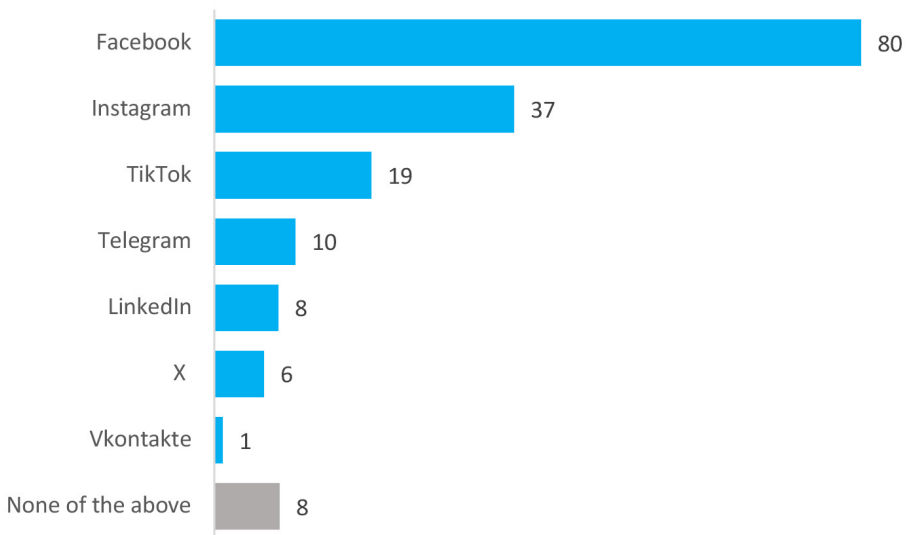
Regarding the hypotheses with support for liberal democratic principles as dependent variable, we employ the linear regression analysis. The results (Table 2 and Table 3) are then displayed in a form of odds ratios for support for democracy in general, and linear regression coefficients for support for liberal democratic principles.

Findings

Users vs. non-users of social media

The usage of social networks was measured as a multiple choice. Respondents were shown a list of social networks and were asked to mark all of those they use (Figure 1 includes all the networks in the list). In Slovakia, Facebook is definitely the most widely used social network with 80% of the population declaring usage. It is followed by Instagram with 37% of the population using it. Only eight percent of the population declares they do not use any of the social media included in the questionnaire (see Figure 1). Below, in a more detailed analysis of online participation, we focus on the two most used social networks in Slovakia – Facebook and Instagram.

Figure 1: Usage of Social Networks in Slovakia



Source: Authors

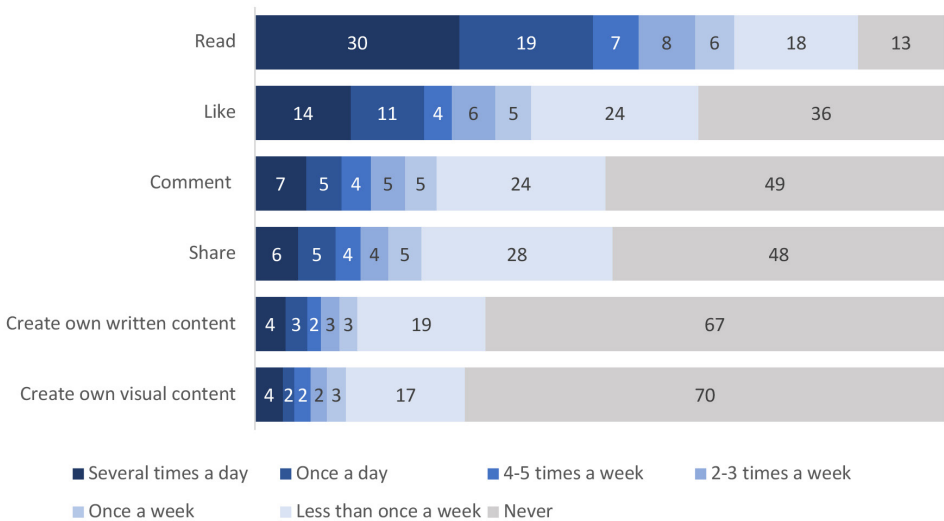
The data indicates that passive engagement with social media, such as reading and liking, is more common on Facebook compared to content creation, such as writing and creating visual content. The graphs below illustrate the frequency of various activities performed by users on Facebook and Instagram. Reading content on Facebook is the most frequent activity, with almost half of users engaging in it at least once a day (and 30% of users doing so several times a day, followed by 19% who read once a day). About one-fifth of the population reads Facebook content on a weekly basis, and another fifth does so less frequently. Notably, 13% of users never read content on Facebook.

In terms of liking content, about a quarter of people express their attitude at least once a day, while almost another quarter does so less frequently – less than once a week. However, the largest share of people claims they never like any content on Facebook (36%).

Commenting on posts has a lower frequency, with only 7% of users doing so several times a day, and the majority (49%) never commenting on Facebook posts. Sharing content is also infrequent, with about one in ten people engaging daily, and 48% of users reporting that they have never shared any content.

Creating original content is not a common activity, whether written or visual. More than two-thirds of respondents report that they never create their own content on Facebook. However, about 5–6% of users create original content daily, while another 7–8% do so once or more times a week. While a segment of users is highly engaged with frequent reading and liking, a significant portion rarely or never engages in content creation or sharing.

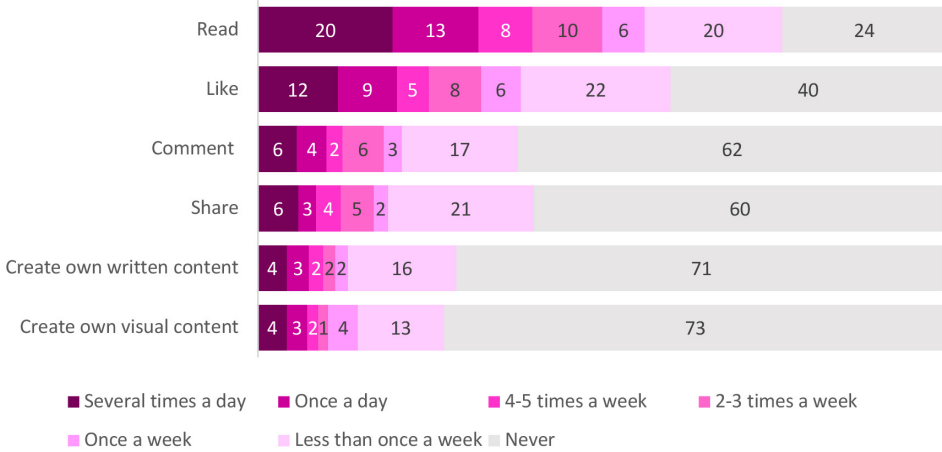
Figure 2: Intensity of political participation on Facebook (in %)



Source: Authors

The intensity of political participation on Instagram is quite similar to that on Facebook, although the number of users is more than twice as small. Reading about social or political issues is the most common activity. Conversely, creating original written or visual content is the least common activity, with more than 70% of people reporting that they have never done so. The precise share of people engaging in each activity is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Intensity of political participation on Instagram (in %)



Source: Authors

The data on political participation on Facebook and Instagram indicates that passive engagement with social media – such as reading and to some extent liking – is more common compared to active engagement – such as writing or posting one’s own visual content. While some users are highly engaged with frequent reading and liking, there is also a significant portion who rarely or never engage actively.

Exposure to social media

In the first step, we performed regression analysis with binary indicators of people’s engagement with eight social networks, plus an indicator for using any social network or none. The analysis shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups: Facebook users and non-users in terms of their support for democracy or liberal democratic principles. The same holds true for most other social networks as well. In terms of supporting democracy in general and/or liberal democratic principles, there are no statistically significant differences between users and non-users of X, VKontakte, LinkedIn and Telegram.

Only a few effects seem to be present in the population. Users of Instagram have a higher probability of supporting democracy as a regime, as compared to non-users. However, the principles of liberal democracy are not supported more among Instagram users than among non-users.

Finally, individuals who are disconnected from any social network (the subpopulation of non-users) are significantly less supportive of liberal democratic principles. However, non-users constitute only around 8% of the general

population; they tend to be older with lower education levels and have lower interest in political participation even in offline contexts. It is likely that this segment actively avoids politics and may feel detached from it, thus expressing more negative attitudes toward principles of liberal democracy.

The results indicate that both hypotheses H1a and H1b are rejected. In none of the tested social media platforms did we find a negative impact from social media exposure. Surprisingly, we found a positive effect in the case of Instagram.

Table 2: Regression Coefficients

	Support for democracy	Support for principles of liberal democracy
Usage FB	1.294	1.087
Usage IG	1.296*	0.970
Usage X	1.476	1.069
Usage VK	0.378	0.787
Usage LI	1.064	0.995
Usage YT	1.775***	1.119*
Usage TK	1.069	1.105*
Usage TG	0.879	0.950
Usage ANY	0.796	0.861*

Source: Authors

Passive vs. active social media engagement

In the second step, we tested the relationship between the intensity of political engagement on Facebook and Instagram on support for democracy in general, as well as support for liberal democratic principles. Table 3 shows the regression coefficients.

Hypothesis H2a expected that more intense passive engagement with social media would lower support for democracy as a regime. The analysis shows that passive engagement (reading posts) on Facebook (coefficient = 0.952) and clicktivism (liking posts, coefficient = 0.998) do not have a significant association with support for democracy. On Instagram, the pattern for support for democracy is somewhat similar to that on Facebook but with slightly different intensities. Reading posts (coefficient = 1.08) and liking posts (coefficient = 1.053) do not significantly associate with support for democracy. Thus, hypothesis H2a is rejected.

Hypothesis H2b stated that more intense passive engagement with social media would lead to lower support for liberal democratic principles. We found that reading posts on Facebook is significantly and negatively associated with support for these principles (coefficient = -0.031**). Liking posts does not show

Table 3: Regression Coefficients

Engagement	Particular activity	Support for democracy (odds ratios)	Support for principles of liberal democracy (linear reg. coeff.)
passive	FB / reading	0.952	-0.0305**
	FB / liking	0.998	-0.00244
active	FB / commenting	1.107**	0.0113
	FB / sharing	1.079*	0.00982
	FB / writing	1.153***	0.0217
	FB / creating visual content	1.219***	0.0390**
passive	IG / reading	1.08	-0.00212
	IG / liking	1.053	0.00462
active	IG / commenting	1.161*	0.0248
	IG / sharing	1.239**	0.0152
	IG / writing	1.350***	0.023
	IG / creating visual content	1.313***	0.0378

Source: Authors

a significant association (coefficient = -0.002). Activities on Instagram do not show significant associations; reading posts (coefficient = -0.002) and liking posts (coefficient = 0.005) are not significantly associated with support for these principles. This means that we accept H2b for passive political engagement on Facebook but reject it for Instagram.

Hypothesis H3a expected that higher active political engagement with social media would increase support for democracy as a regime. The regression analysis reveals that active engagement on Facebook is indeed positively associated with support for democracy. Commenting on posts has a significant positive association (coefficient = 1.107**), as does sharing posts (coefficient = 1.079*). Creating and adding one's own statuses (coefficient = 1.153***) and adding photos or videos (coefficient = 1.219***) also show a significant positive association with support for democracy. As for Instagram, the findings are rather similar. Commenting on Instagram posts (coefficient = 1.161*), sharing posts (coefficient = 1.239**), creating and adding one's own statuses (coefficient = 1.350***), and adding photos or videos (coefficient = 1.313***) all show significant positive associations with support for democracy. Thus, we accept hypothesis H3a in full.

Hypothesis H3b posited that more intense active engagement with social media would lead to higher support for liberal democratic principles. The regression analysis shows that activities such as commenting (coefficient = 0.011),

sharing posts (coefficient = 0.010), and creating and adding one's own statuses (coefficient = 0.022) show a positive, though not significant, association. However, adding photos or videos on Facebook is positively and significantly associated with support for the principles of liberal democracy (coefficient = 0.039**). Regarding Instagram participation, none of the activities shows statistically significant effects, leading us to accept hypothesis H3b.

In summary, activities on both Facebook and Instagram that involve more active engagement (such as commenting, sharing and creating content) are generally positively associated with support for democracy. However, the support for principles of liberal democracy is only significantly affected by reading posts on Facebook negatively and by adding photos or videos on Facebook positively, while activities on Instagram do not significantly influence support for the liberal democratic principles.

Discussion

Our research focused on the impact that social media engagement has on democratic attitudes. In general, the findings show that merely using social media does not negatively impact support for democracy. Users and non-users show similar levels of support for democracy when controlling for demographics, political trust and offline participation (H1). Our findings suggest that the impact of social media engagement extends beyond mere usage. Supported by the findings, we argue that it is the way and intensity with which users participate that plays a more significant role.

The analysis showed that passive political engagement on Facebook or Instagram does not have a significant impact on support for democracy (H2a), but passive engagement on Facebook negatively affects support for liberal democratic principles. A possible explanation for the lack of effect on support for democracy might be that democracy, as a political regime, is rhetorically accepted by political elites and the media as the only viable option. Even populist politicians or those with autocratic tendencies who undermine democratic principles in day-to-day politics (e.g. Viktor Orbán or Robert Fico) rhetorically declare their devotion to democracy. Therefore, even if people are passively reading content created by such politicians or media, it has little to no effect on their support for or rejection of democracy. However, more intense passive engagement with social networks leads to less support for liberal democratic principles such as minority rights protection or the right to associate. This finding aligns with expectations that social media often bring about distorted perceptions, including echo chambers, hate speech and selective exposure (Shin et al. 2018; Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017; Chetty & Alathur 2018). We would also argue that the negative impact of passive engagement on Facebook may be a consequence of more passive usage leading to a spiral of negative feedback and

perception distortion, particularly as populist and anti-democratic politicians and disinformation media are significant contributors to content on Facebook.

When it comes to active engagement with social media, the regression analysis revealed that more intensive participation on both Facebook and Instagram is significantly related to increased support for democracy but not for liberal democratic principles (H3). The regression models also included control variables for political trust and offline participation. The fact that the influence of active social media engagement did not change after including trust in the prime minister and the opposition leader indicates that partisan orientation is not biasing the results – for example, it is not just supporters of the opposition driving both social media engagement and democratic attitudes. Therefore, we argue there is reason to believe that a learning or deliberative-style effect may indeed be present (Salzman 2019; Coleman 2017; Graham & Schwanholz 2020). Our research cannot, however, identify the exact nature of the causal mechanism linking active engagement and democratic attitudes, which poses a challenge for future research. Additionally, future research must address the idea that personal characteristics – such as values and morals – may predispose individuals to higher democratic standards as well as their promotion and active public participation, including engagement with social media. In such cases, the effects we found could be spurious.

Blaming and shaming social media for the deterioration of democracy may be overstated. Sometimes, as Margetts writes, social media ‘are blamed for almost everything that is wrong with democracy’ (2018: 1). Conversely, our study shows that non-users of social media have the same level of support for democracy and liberal democratic principles as social media users. Thus, we assert that mere engagement with social media cannot be solely blamed for negative effects or consequences on democratic attitudes. However, the problem with social media likely lies in how easily populist and autocratic politicians – as well as other social actors – can spread their messages, regardless of how manipulative or false they may be. In other words, there is no gatekeeping function like that found in traditional media with their editorial processes.

Therefore, if we consider a society where populist and anti-democratic politicians are part of the government and governing coalition, we argue that it is primarily their impact that contributes to a decrease in support for liberal democratic principles – whether they communicate via social media or not. We support our argument with regression coefficients from our models. The effects we found regarding political trust are several times more influential (in terms of coefficient sizes) than those associated with social media engagement. This raises questions about whether it is merely the use of social media (more or less intensively) that harms democracy or whether social media are simply platforms that political elites often abuse to spread ideas and emotions that attack liberal democracy as a particular form of governance.

Conclusion

Social media – and social networks in particular – are often blamed for decreasing support for democracy and contributing to democratic backsliding. Our study showed that merely using social media (in relation to political content) does not appear to negatively impact support for democracy. We found no significant differences in democratic attitudes between users and non-users of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, Telegram and VKontakte, except for Instagram, where users showed slightly more support for democracy. We argue that it is not whether one uses social media but how intensively and in what kind of participation one engages that matters. Intensive social media engagement can influence support for liberal democratic principles. Frequent passive engagement on Facebook was linked to lower support for these principles – likely due to exposure to polarised content and disinformation.

Active engagement on both Facebook and Instagram correlated with greater support for democracy in general but not specifically for liberal principles. The relationship between intensity of active engagement and democratic attitudes may involve deliberative effects; however, the precise mechanisms remain unclear. Future research should explore the potential influence of personal values and characteristics on these findings.

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