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Understanding Social Media Use and Political Participation: A Lens of Social Media Social Capital and Gender Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Social media capital, a distinct dimension of social capital that emerges from social connections and interactions on social media, plays a pivotal role in shaping how individuals engage within digital networks. While this emerging concept has gained increasing scholarly attention, further exploration is necessary to uncover these dynamics with gendered inequality in online political behaviors. This study, based on an online survey in the United States ($N = 714$), illuminates key insights. Firstly, consistent with prior research, it reaffirms the positive association between political social media use and online political participation, with social media social capital both driving these behaviors while also moderating the relationship between them. Additionally, and more importantly, gender differences are observed in how social media social capital influence participation, with a greater amplifying effect more pronounced for men than for women. By explicating and integrating social media social capital into the discourse on online political engagement and considering a gender lens, this study contributes to the conceptual and theoretical understanding of social capital and highlights its potential to shape or mitigate digital inequality through the lens of gender dynamics.

Research has identified social media's role in fostering engagement in online political actions, such as information sharing and consumption (Lane et al., 2017), voting behaviors (Biswas et al., 2014), and activism and protests (Valenzuela, 2013). Despite the opportunities that social media provides, its equalization effects do not benefit all groups, particularly those who face limited access and underrepresentation, leading to the amplification of the digital divide (Literat & Brough, 2019). Specifically, gender is important in this regard because differences in social media use may cause disparities in their online political engagement, a cross-national concern acknowledged across studies (Ahmed, 2020; Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021). Moreover, these disparities are not merely individual variations but reflect a pervasive social structure that shapes access to resources, patterns of participation, and broader power dynamics in the political domain (Pan et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, it is crucial to examine not only the existence of gender gaps but also whether and how gender may be implicated in the mechanisms of participation in the digital political sphere.

This study aims to contribute to the current scholarship by integrating social capital theory with analyses of digital inequality to examine gendered patterns in political social media use, social media social capital, and online political participation. This study firstly replicates the well-established relationship between social media use for political purposes and online political participation,

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providing new empirical evidence to the debate on digital divides. Although prior research has shown that social media use for political purposes fosters online political participation, gender disparities in social media usage patterns and psychological factors suggest that these gaps may persist (Dahlke & Zhang, 2023). These form the fundamental assumption of our study.

Moreover, this study focuses on the specific role and mechanisms of social capital and the gendered differences within social media space. Social capital, defined as individuals' embedded and accumulated resources through social networking and relationships (Coleman, 1988), is essential for shaping individuals' behaviors (Lin, 2001). Within the importance of social media to connect individuals and fostering relationships, *social media capital* or *social media social capital*, a distinct aspect of social capital that extends into the online sphere and is based on social media interactions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Saxton & Guo, 2014), is introduced as it has a unique capacity to connect individuals and foster latent or physically disconnected relationships. This study adopts "social media social capital" to keep the theoretical and methodological consistency.

While previous studies have predominantly examined how social media use fosters social capital, this study adds evidence of whether pre-existing social media social capital shapes political social media use. This investigation contributes to the understanding of how individuals leverage their existing resources from social media for political purposes, a dimension that has been underexplored yet is important for understanding social media use patterns. Furthermore, like other resources, access to and utilization of social capital are unevenly distributed across social groups, particularly among lower socioeconomic status individuals or marginalized groups (Li et al., 2005; McDonald & Day, 2010). Building on this, gender is a key axis of stratification. Although previous studies have examined gender differences in social network sites use and the formation of bridging and bonding social capital (Liu et al., 2016; Saeed, 2023), research has yet to adequately investigate how gendered dynamics of social media use and social media social capital affect online political participation. By positioning gender at the core of this analysis, the present study provides a novel perspective on understanding digital inequalities within online political engagement.

In summary, this study utilizes an online survey conducted in the United States in January 2024 to replicate (a) the association between political social media use and online political participatory behaviors, (b) how social media social capital associates with political social media use and participation, and answer (c) what are the gender differences in the relationships between these key variables. The conceptualization and application of social media social capital enriches the theoretical framework for understanding social capital within the digital landscape, providing new insights into individuals' media usage and online political behaviors. Furthermore, since gender disparities exist in both social media and political participation patterns (D. Lilleker et al., 2021), incorporating social media social capital into the analytical framework allows for a deeper comprehension of gendered political inequalities, especially how such kinds of capital sources are unevenly distributed between and affect men and women.

Literature review

Political social media use and online political participation

Social networking tools have transcended borders between online and offline realms, integrating into the fabric of our everyday lives (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). Generally, social media encompasses a wide range of platforms, such as social network sites, blogs and microblogs, video-sharing sites, content-sharing or messaging applications, and even virtual worlds, serving personal, professional, and social purposes (Aichner et al., 2021). Given this breadth, some scholars investigate social media as a group or holistic phenomenon rather than paying attention to a specific platform (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Within this environment, individuals use social media for political purposes in multiple ways, such as information consumption, opinion expression, and even activism (Biswas et al., 2014). The two most prevalent forms are consumptive and expressive use. Consumptive use, as a less interactive

form of social media use for political information, consists of activities like reading news and comments (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, 2013). For example, more than half of U.S. adults report at least sometimes consuming news via social media, a proportion that has continued to rise in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2024). At the same time, expressive social media use, such as posting, commenting, or sharing, which emphasizes interactive behaviors, is also another important part of political social media use (Wang et al., 2024). Integrating both types of use can capture the full spectrum of how social media use can facilitate political participation (Lee et al., 2017).

Moreover, this study adopts the conceptualization and measurement of online political participation as behaviors that involve active engagement in the political process through digital means (Ruess et al., 2023). In this study, we distinguish the two by defining political social media use as engagement with political information on social platforms, both consumptively and expressively, whereas online political participation refers to behaviors such as donating, signing petitions, or joining groups. A meta-analysis has identified a positive association between digital media use and civic and political engagement (Boulianne, 2020). Moreover, empirical studies on the effects of social media use for political purposes on online political participation have revealed various aspects. For instance, both informational and consumptive use enhance online political participation (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019), encouraging users to express their viewpoints online (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Additionally, usage for expressions, such as creating posts and comments, could predict online engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013). Cross-national studies have further implied that using social media is positively related to participation within different countries (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019; Xenos et al., 2014).

Therefore, building on existing findings, this study treats this positive relationship as a replication check that establishes a baseline for subsequent analyses:

H1: Political social media use is positively associated with online political participation.

Social media social capital and its mechanisms

Generally, social capital is defined as the resources embedded in and accumulated from an individual's social networks, which can be utilized for collective behaviors (Lin, 2001, 2008). There are various theoretical and conceptual arguments about the function of social capital. Firstly, Bourdieu's (1986) theory integrates elements of conflict theory into his conceptualization of social capital, defining it as the accumulation of resources from networks of institutionalized or personal relationships characterized by reciprocity. From his perspective, social capital emphasizes power dynamics, indicating that its distribution can influence social class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). Secondly, Coleman (1988) posits that social capital, referring to the resources accumulated through individuals' social networks, ties, and relationships, plays a crucial role in facilitating individuals' rational actions. This approach resides in the structural functionalism of relations among people and views social capital as a mode of social structure that enables individuals to act within a structured context. Additionally, Putnam (2000) distinguishes between two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to the connections and relationships within a homogenous group where members share similar backgrounds, characteristics, and interests, while bridging social capital links dissimilar others together through loose ties. These interpretations underscore the importance of social capital to facilitate individual and community activities and reproduce benefits (Lin, 2001).

Our study builds on these theoretical frameworks by recognizing social capital as individual resources and it can promote rational actions. Notably, when transitioning social capital from offline to online environments, it is evident that social capital evolves and finds a new context in social media, where individuals can interact beyond physical boundaries (Cao et al., 2015). Different from traditional social capital, which primarily develops from in-person and interpersonal interactions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), social media creates a new sphere for social capital formation. Firstly, social media enhances and intensifies offline connections into digital spaces (Skoric et al., 2016). Secondly, social

media facilitates relationships among large size of individuals across geographical locations at minimal cost (Pasek et al., 2009). Additionally, social media enables the articulation of maintenance of weak-tie relationships, further expanding social capital beyond immediate, close-knit circles (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). Therefore, social capital in social media settings is distinct from its offline counterpart in its ability to connect individuals both online and offline while also fostering latent and physically disconnected relationships.

Given these developments, scholars have increasingly focused on more social media capital or social media social capital, a new form of capital emerging from digital interactions (Carmichael et al., 2015). The current conceptualizations of social media social capital are highly contextually based. For instance, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) introduced social capital in social media spaces as a novel conceptual and empirical construct, arguing its influence on individuals' political behaviors. Some scholars define social media capital in organizational management as the resources that organizations or individuals acquire through their social media activities (Saxton & Guo, 2014, 2020). In the journalism context, social media capital refers to the resources that news organizations derive from audience engagement and interactions on social media platforms (Shin & Ognyanova, 2022). Drawing from these conceptualizations, this study defines social media social capital as the embedded resources from social media and emphasizes its influence on both the social networks themselves and on public engagement.

Prior studies have primarily identified that social media use enhances social capital (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Platforms like Facebook enable users to sustain and strengthen both online and offline social connections and facilitate social interactions, thereby contributing to increasing social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). More specifically, a systematic literature review has found that using online social tools could foster an individual's bonding social capital (Williams, 2019), while another review has demonstrated a positive association between social networking sites use and bridging social capital (Ahmad et al., 2023). While studies have confirmed the positive effects of social media use in fostering social capital (Duradoni et al., 2022), the interplay whereby social media social capital, once accumulated, might affect individuals' social media use remains underexplored. Although research in the context of workplace dynamics has explored the complex relationships between intraorganizational social media use and social capital, highlighting that greater social capital, reflected as social interaction ties, can facilitate work-related social media use (Sun & Shang, 2014), this research specifically examines how accumulated social media social capital relates to political social media use.

This oversight presents an important gap in a possible dynamic process where social media social capital is not only a product but also a contributing factor to the development of online social networks, as a prior study has suggested a potential reciprocity between social network features and social support or capital (Xu et al., 2021). Building on these insights, this study proposes a hypothesis:

H2: Social media social capital is positively associated with political social media use.

Additionally, social capital is widely used to explain political behaviors, with its relevance extending into the online realm (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Social ties and interactions potentially influence how individuals use online tools for political engagement (Ferrucci et al., 2020). In particular, social media facilitates networks of connections and interactions that effectively mobilize users to get involved in online political activities (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017). Empirical evidence supports this relationship, demonstrating that social capital derived from online social networking platforms positively correlates with online political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Additionally, research on Chinese social media contexts has also highlighted that online social capital fosters political discussion and expression (Wen & Wei, 2018). Given the consistency of these findings, we also take this as a replication hypothesis and it becomes evident that social media social capital and participation are positively associated.

H3: Social media social capital is positively associated with online political participation.

Moving forward, based on prior research and our hypothesis, we seek to explore the nuanced role of social media social capital within this dynamic. Rather than focusing on the mediator role of social capital between media use and civic participation as in previous studies (Choi & Shin, 2017), our focus shifts toward its interactive effects, specifically, how pre-existing levels of social media social capital associate with social media use and participation. Social media use for news consumption has been shown to be positively associated with both social capital and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Moreover, individuals possessing well-developed networks are better equipped to utilize social media tools for accessing political information (Hwang & Kim, 2015; Shirazi, 2013). Research has further confirmed that different levels of informal socializing within social capital can strengthen or weaken the effects of social media on engagement (Choi & Shin, 2017). Given these insights, we aim to further examine social media social capital's role specifically in political contexts, and thereby, we raise a research question.

RQ1: How does social media social capital moderate the association between political social media use and online political participation?

Reducing or amplifying gender inequality?

Despite the relationships between political social media use, social media social capital, and online political participation being well established, studies continue to explore how such online social tools could exacerbate digital divides. Especially, research has still found the existence of gender disparities in online political engagement (Maximova & Lukyanova, 2020). However, the exploration of how gender differences in the political usage of social media might affect online political engagement is still confronted with some limitations. Firstly, some research takes gender as a controlling factor when examining social media use and online political behavior, while relatively insufficient studies include gender as a primary aspect of the research framework (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021). Secondly, although previous studies have identified gender differences in online political participation and social media use, respectively (Bode, 2017), more evidence is needed to investigate the dynamics of how gender intersects with political social media use to influence participatory behaviors.

In traditional political participation, the interplay between gender and various media channels, such as radio, newspapers, and television, has been shown to influence disparities in political knowledge and even participation levels (Nisbet, 2008). As digital platforms gain prominence, exploring gender differences within social media and online participation becomes significant. For instance, research conducted in India has revealed that social media usage correlates with widening gendered differences in online political participation compared with television and radio (Ahmed, 2020). Moreover, this phenomenon is not confined to a single country. A cross-national study in three Sub-Saharan African nations has demonstrated that while news consumption on social media promotes participation, it still amplifies gender-based participatory inequality (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021). Notably, a study has found that although there was still a gender gap in critical digital engagement and support for protest, the mobilization effects of digital media use were still substantial for women in China (Wagner et al., 2021).

This study builds on these insights to examine political social media use's role in amplifying or reducing gender disparities in online political participation. The question is particularly relevant in the United States, where the participatory differences have been a widely studied topic. Although previous research has suggested that the equalization effects of social media use appear substantial in the United States (D. Lilleker et al., 2021), there were still notably different patterns of participation between men and women, which contributed to the emergence of a greater gender gap (Bode, 2017; Lutz & Hoffmann, 2021). Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: Does political social media use increase or decrease gender gaps in online political participation?

Social media social capital and gender inequality

Notably, existing research has identified some mechanisms of gendered participation within social media environments. For example, women may experience higher incivility and hostility online, which discourages them from engaging in political discourse (Kenski et al., 2020). They are also disproportionately influenced by *mansplaining*, a phenomenon on social media platforms where a man explains something to a woman in a patronizing way, further undermining their voice and reinforcing gender inequalities (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). These findings underscore that women face barriers to accessing online political discourse and activities. This study, particularly, emphasizes the role of resources such as social media social capital, which may buffer against such disadvantages. At the same time, disparities in such sources risk enlarging rather than reducing gender gaps in online political participation.

Like other resources, social capital is not evenly distributed across social groups, leading to different patterns of access and utilization. For example, low socioeconomic status (SES) individuals tend to draw social capital from informal relations, while advantaged individuals often possess social capital from formal social networks and civic engagement (Li et al., 2005). This nature is also evident in gendered social networks, where men generally have greater access to social capital compared to women (McDonald & Day, 2010). In civic engagement, men and women may tend to cultivate different types of social connections and social capital, which subsequently influence their political participation in different ways (Lowndes, 2004). Specifically, research has found that women are more integrated into female-majority social networks and involved in community-based or informal social interactions, while men often invest their social capital in formal and male-dominant political and business areas (Miyata et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2006). Notably, a recent study proposing a theoretical model of political behaviors based on gender-identity networks has suggested that increased social capital for women enhances their ability to engage in collective actions (Prillaman, 2023).

The rise of the internet and social media has introduced new opportunities for women and other marginalized groups to expand their social networks and develop social capital (Saeed, 2023). However, a meta-analysis has suggested that gender differences in offline social networks may extend to social networking sites use, with men leveraging social media tools usage more for bridging social capital (Liu et al., 2016). Additionally, a study of journalistic networks on Twitter has found that male journalists with higher professional reputation and social capital were more likely to use social media to gain their visibility and peer recognition, while female journalists did not benefit in the same way (Maares et al., 2021). Combined with literature on social media social capital's importance for social media use and participation, while these studies yield important gendered patterns in access to and use of social capital on social media, evidence on whether gender fundamentally shapes how these resources jointly mitigate or amplify gaps in online political engagement is limited.

Recognizing that social capital plays a crucial role in both reflecting and potentially mitigating gender imbalance, particularly serving as a kind of resource for women's political inclusion (Prillaman, 2023), this study aims to investigate how social media social capital might explain gender disparities in online spaces. This inquiry could enhance scholarly comprehension of social media social capital conceptualization or theory within topics of digital politics and inequality.

> **RQ3:** Does gender moderate the effect of social media social capital on the relationship between political use and political participation?

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research framework of this study.

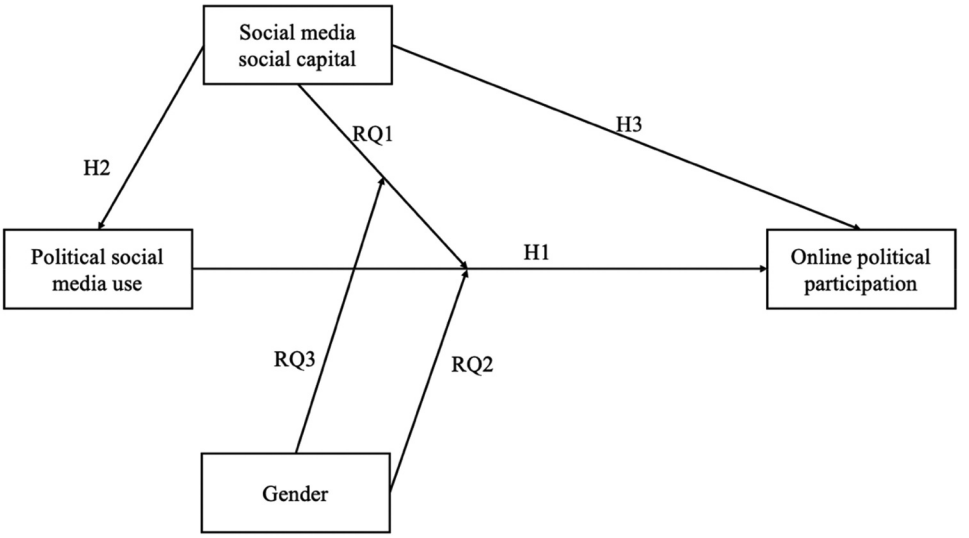


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study.

Method

An online survey was conducted within the United States during January 2024 and Qualtrics administered the recruitment by its online panel system, with age and gender quotas established. While this approach has certain limitations, quota sampling is used in online panel research to approximate representativeness when random sampling is not feasible (Vehovar et al., 2017).[1] The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Nanyang Technological University (IRB-2024–177). Before proceeding with the survey, the consent form and screening questions were displayed, confirming that the respondents were adults from the United States. After cleaning for the missing data, the sample includes 714 U.S. adults, with 55.7% men and a mean age of 46.84 years (SD = 16.72).[2]

Measures

Online political participation

Regarding the dependent variable of online political participation, five questions were asked about the frequency of their participation in activities including posting, participating in demonstrations, making donations, signing petitions, and joining groups using a five-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*) (M = 1.46; SD = .62, Cronbach's α = .85) (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Political social media use

For political social media use, respondents were asked about the frequency of both engaging with political information on social media, including expressive activities (e.g., posting, commenting, sharing, and liking) and consumptive activities (e.g., reading news, reading profiles or timelines, and searching) using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *more than once a day*) (Ahmed et al., 2021; Leiner et al., 2018). This variable was derived by averaging these seven items (M = 3.41; SD = 1.62, α = .91).

[1]Regression assumptions were assessed. Q–Q plots of residuals suggested approximate normality with minor tail deviations; with a sample of over 700, OLS regression is robust to such departures. Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.0 to 2.0, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. The Breusch–Pagan test indicated heteroskedasticity ($p < .001$); therefore, all reported models use heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1) standard errors.

[2]The breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the sample, as well as comparisons with population data, is provided in the Appendix A, Table A4.

Gender

Gender was originally measured with three response options: 1 = Male, 2 = Female, and 3 = Other (please specify). However, after cleaning the data, no respondents selected "other," and only male and female responses were retained in the analysis. Therefore, gender was treated as a dummy variable in the subsequent analysis. Gender codes for men were 0 and women were 1 (55.7% men).

Social media social capital

For social media social capital, four items assessed respondents' agreement with the statements about using social media to promote discussions about addressing community issues, find individuals to solve their community problems, cultivate community values, and facilitate connections among community members using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; $M = 2.23$; $SD = 1.19$, $\alpha = .95$), based on Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) measurement of social media social capital.

Control variables

Additionally, some demographic and motivational variables were included: age ($M = 46.84$; $SD = 16.72$), education level (1 = *no formal education* to 8 = *doctoral degree*; *Median* = some college, $M = 5.52$; $SD = 1.11$), race (63.5% White, 16.7% African American, 12.4% Hispanics, 6% Asian, 0.7% Native American, 0.8% others), monthly household income (1 = *less than $1,000* to 10 = *more than $20,000*; *Median* = $5,000–$6,999, $M = 5.27$; $SD = 3.30$), marital status (33.8% single, 50.4% married/domestic partnership, 11% divorced, 3.9% widowed, 1% separated), political interest (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*; $M = 3.55$; $SD = .98$), and political ideology (1 = *extremely liberal* to 5 = *extremely conservative*; $M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.39$).

Analytic strategy

Before testing hypotheses, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess potential common method variance. Then, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with HC1 robust SEs was conducted. Models 1–3 tested main effects (H1–H3), and Models 4–6 examined interactions (RQ1–RQ3) with simple slopes analyses, plots, standardized coefficients with 95% confidence intervals, and effect-size metrics.

Results

Since this study relies on self-reported measures, we conducted Harman's single-factor test before testing hypotheses to assess potential common method variance, which is variance attributable to the measurement method rather than the constructs themselves and can bias relationships among variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). An unrotated factor analysis of all measurement items showed that the total variance extracted by one factor was 45.70%, below the 50% threshold, suggesting common method bias is not a major concern.

To test H1, H2, and H3, a set of OLS regression models was employed. Table 1 Model 1 reported a positive association between political social media use and online political participation ($b = .20$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$), which supported H1. Notably, gender was significantly associated with online political participation behaviors, with women having less participation compared to reference group men ($b = -.09$, $SE = .04$, $p = .01$). Taking political social media use as the dependent variable, the results from Table 1 Model 2 found a positive association between social media social capital and political social media use ($b = .58$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals with higher social media social capital were more likely to use social media for political purposes, supporting H2. Moreover, Table 1 Model 3 showed that social media social capital was also positively associated with online political participation ($b = .21$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$). H3 was supported.

Table 1. Regression models testing the associations among political social media use, social media social capital, and online political participation.

	Model 1 Online political participation	Model 2 Political social media use	Model 3 Online political participation
(Intercept)	.63 (.14)***	1.45 (.37)***	.73 (.15)***
Political social media use	.20 (.01)***		
Social media social capital		.58 (.05)***	.21 (.02)***
Gender (1 = Women)[d]	−.09 (.04)*	.05 (.09)	−.10 (.04)*
Age	−.01 (.00)***	−.01 (.00)***	−.01 (.00)***
Marital status(1 = Others)[d]	−.03 (.04)	−.03 (.10)	−.00 (.04)
Race: African American[d]	.09 (.07)	.57 (.15)***	.16 (.07)**
Race: Others[d]	−.13 (.06)*	−.07 (.14)	−.14 (.06)*
Education	.07 (.02)***	−.04 (.05)***	.05 (.02)**
Income	.00 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	−.00 (.01)
Political interest	.05 (.02)**	.41 (.05)***	.11 (.02)***
Political ideology	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.02)	−.02 (.01)
R^2 (%)	41.6	36.1	34.6

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1) standard errors in parentheses; [d] means dummy variable; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Regression models of social media capital predicting social media use and online political participation.

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
(Intercept)	1.28 (.12)***	1.30 (.13)***	1.25 (.12)***
Political social media use	.16 (.01)***	.18 (.02)***	14 (.02)***
Social media social capital	.10 (.03)***	.12 (.02)***	.18 (.03)***
Gender (1 = Women)[d]	−.09 (.03)**	−.10 (.04)**	−.05 (.04)
Age	−.00 (.00)***	−.00 (.00)**	−.00 (.00)**
Marital status (1 = Others)[d]	.01 (.10)	−.01 (.04)	.01 (.04)
Race: African American[d]	.03 (.15)***	.06 (.07)	.03 (.07)
Race: Others[d]	−.12 (.02)	−.13 (.06)*	−.11 (.05)*
Education	.05 (.05)	.06 (.02)***	.05 (.02)**
Income	−.00 (.02)	−.00 (.01)	−.00 (.00)
Political interest	.03 (.05)***	.04 (.02)*	.04 (.02)*
Political ideology	−.01 (.02)	−.02 (.01)	−.01 (.01)
Social media social capital*Political social media use	.05 (.01)***		.07 (.02)***
Political social media use*Gender		−.04 (.03)	.03 (.03)
Social media social capital*Gender			−.13 (.03) ***
Social media social capital*Political social media use*Gender			−.04 (.02).
R^2 (%)	46.9	44.6	48.8
ΔR^2 (interaction) (%)	2.5		.50
Cohen's f^2	.047		.009

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS coefficients with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1) standard errors in parentheses; [d] means dummy variable;. $p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. Standardized β for interaction term in Model 4 was .16, 95% CI [.08, .24]. For Model 6, the standardized β was −.14, 95% CI [−.28, .00].

For RQ1 (Model 4 of Table 2), a statistically significant interaction was observed between political social media use and social media social capital in predicting political participation ($b = .05$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$). This implied that the positive association between political social media use and online political participation is stronger among individuals with higher social media social capital. As shown in Figure 2 and confirmed by simple slope analysis, the positive relationship between political social media use and online political participation becomes steeper as social media social capital increases (−1 *SD*: $b = .10$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$; *M*: $b = .16$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$; +1 *SD*: $b = .22$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$). Social media social capital amplifies the positive effect of social media use on online political participation. In terms of effect size, the interaction explained an additional 2.5% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 2.5\%$, $f^2 = .047$; $\beta = .16$, 95% CI [.08, .24]).

For RQ2, results from Table 2 Model 5 shown that the interaction between political social media use and gender was not statistically significant in predicting online political participation ($b = -.04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .169$). This means that the positive effect of political social media use on participation did not differ significantly between men and women in this sample.

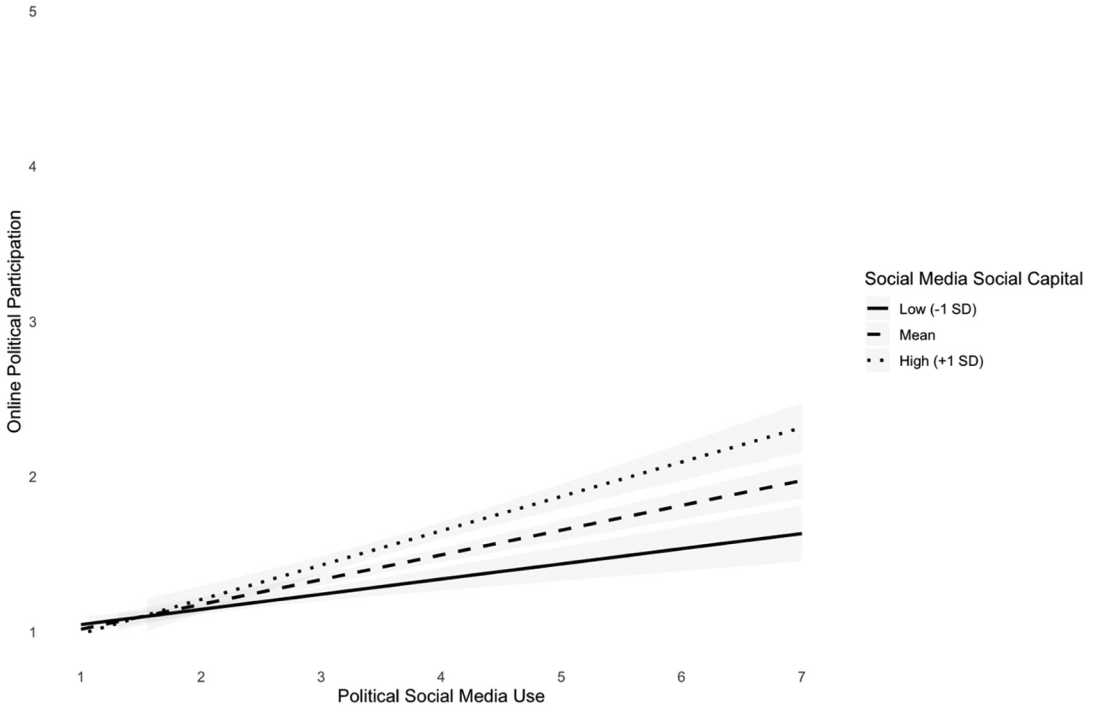


Figure 2. Two-way interactions between political social media use and social media social capital in predicting online political participation. *Note*. Predicted values are plotted with 95% robust confidence intervals.

Lastly, we conducted a three-way moderated moderation analysis to explore RQ3. A non-significant three-way interaction among political social media use, social media social capital, and gender in predicting online political participation was discovered ($B = -.04$, $SE = .02$, $p = .054$) (Model 6 in Table 2). Simple slopes analyses indicated that political social media use was positively associated with online political participation at all levels of social capital for both men and women (men: low capital, −1 *SD*: $B = .05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .010$; high capital, +1 *SD*: $B = .23$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$; women: low capital, −1 *SD*: $B = .13$, SE = .03, $p < .001$; high capital, +1 *SD*: $B = .20$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$), indicating no statistically significant gender differences in this moderation pattern.

Unexpectedly, a two-way interaction between social media social capital and gender was observed in Model 6 ($b = -.13$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), suggesting that the positive effect of social media social capital on participation was weaker for women than for men.

Discussion

This study examines the way that social media use for political purposes affects gendered differences regarding online political participation, considering the underlying mechanism driven by social media social capital. Firstly, our findings underscore social media's beneficial effects in promoting online political engagement (H1). Prior research has identified the profound effect of digital media use, including consumption of news, interpersonal communications, and spending time online, on civic engagement. This phenomenon is not exclusive to American politics; it is a global trend (Boulianne, 2020).

Secondly, our investigation of social media social capital identified a positive association with political social media use (H2). Whereas previous studies have primarily focused on how using social media increases social media social capital (Skoric et al., 2016), our findings underscore that social media social capital can promote political social media use. Moreover, the results present a potentially

intriguing reciprocity of this relationship. Indeed, the pre-existing social media social capital can be positively correlated with the rising usage of social media for political expression and information consumption. One possible explanation is that with accumulated resources like information, influence, and support (McDonald & Mair, 2010), individuals with more social media social capital may feel higher levels of connectedness and engagement with their online social communities (Steinfield et al., 2013), which can motivate more consistent or increased social media use.

Thirdly, in our study, social media social capital and online political participation were found to be positively associated (H3). This finding not only reinforces the established knowledge of social capital's positive impact on traditional political participation (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998) but also underscores extending social capital's mechanisms from offline to online. Social capital, characterized by social trust and norms of reciprocity, can encourage political discussions and interactions online (Putnam, 2000), propelling active involvement in online political activism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Moreover, our result also complements existing research primarily about the significance of social media social capital, by emphasizing that it represents an evolving and increasingly important resource that individuals leverage to foster engagement within digital spaces (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the results demonstrated a moderator role played by social media social capital between political social media use and participation (RQ1), providing new evidence that pre-existing social media social capital enhances the impacts of social media use on online engagement (Choi & Shin, 2017). It can be understood through the lens that as the number of digital citizens continues to grow, individuals are turning to internet tools for building and maintaining their social relationships (Lin et al., 2014) and getting more spaces for information exchange and the expression of ideas (Chung et al., 2016). Individuals with higher social media social capital may receive more political information from their social networks, enhancing their political knowledge and facilitating participation online (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Within this context, social media social capital is the catalyzing force behind using social media to promote political participation. All these findings are consistent with social capital theory's expectations (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001), in which social capital facilitates proactive political decision-making.

The novel contribution of the present study lies in introducing a gendered perspective to these relationships. Although current studies have highlighted that certain underrepresented groups, such as those with lower education levels, lower income, minority racial groups, and women, still experience a continuation of inequalities within the social media space (Literat & Brough, 2019), we did not find evidence of gender disparities in political social media use for online political participation in this sample (RQ2). One possible explanation is that social media's extensive reach and egalitarian effects in the United States (D. Lilleker et al., 2021) could potentially offer relatively equal access and opportunities for online political engagement to women. This aligns with the concept of digital inclusion in the United States, which emphasizes the accessibility of digital tools across different groups to ensure equal engagement (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Similar results have been found in other contexts, such as in Singapore, where news consumption on social media promotes online participation for both women and men (Wen et al., 2013).

Interestingly, upon conducting post hoc regression and moderation analysis, we found a gender difference in how consumptive social media use impacts online political participation (see Appendix A, Table A1 and Figure A1). Specifically, men are far more likely than women to gain from the advantages of their consumption of social media (e.g., reading one's own political news feed, browsing the timelines or profiles of friends, and using the search bar on social media) in their participation in online politics. The varying ways that men and women engage with political information on social media may account for gender differences in consumptive use. Research, for instance, has revealed that women are more engaged in interpersonal communication, while men are more involved in information-seeking and task-oriented activities (Jackson et al., 2001). Moreover, women may also be more inclined to use social media for social purposes (Ihm & Hsieh, 2015). However, not all studies supported such evidence, with findings suggesting that women are quite active in information-seeking as well (Chen et al., 2015).

Therefore, future exploration of the patterns of gender divides regarding political social media use is warranted.

Finally, we examined whether gender moderated the relationship between political social media use, social media social capital, and online political participation, with no statistically significant three-way interaction found (*RQ3*). However, a significant two-way interaction between social media social capital and gender in predicting online participation indicates that the positive effect of social media social capital on participation was stronger for men than for women. This suggests that men who are more well-connected and active online may be more inclined to transform social capital from social media into online political action. This phenomenon could be attributed to the relationships between networks categorized by elements like gender and other socioeconomic status and the way in which these networks are connected to social capital, where social capital flows differently inside and between their networks (Cook, 2014). For instance, research on traditional workplaces has found that women, despite gaining access to networks, do not always derive the same level of benefit from those networks as men do (Timberlake, 2005). Moreover, some structural barriers or gendered patterns may hinder women's ability to leverage their social media connections as effectively for political participation as men (Loscocco et al., 2009). This pattern appears to extend to online political environments. Nonetheless, recognizing that women within online social groups gathering more resources and support (Barak et al., 2008) can afford more opportunities and access to online activities (Schuster, 2013) is crucial. Future studies need to further investigate the gendered patterns within these dynamics.

Theoretically, our study further extends the scholarly discussion of social capital from traditional fields to social media spaces and political activism, thus supplementing scholarly understanding of its explication and mechanisms in the digital space. Social capital within the social media sphere is not merely a digital extension of offline capital but an influential factor in political behaviors. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital interactions can translate into political action, whether through the forms of disseminating information or participating in protests and petitions. This aligns with and extends Putnam's (2000) theory of rebuilding community networks into the digital domain.

Moreover, this study especially observes the dynamics between social media social capital and digital inequality. Access to gaining social capital varies based on individuals' socio-economic disparities and their ability to access opportunities, information, and support, which in turn reinforces existing social inequalities (Cook, 2014). The differential amplifying effects of social media social capital for men and women have implications for the gender divide discourse. As a resource-based approach, this aligns with Harell's (2009) argument that gendered distributions of social capital can shape distinct pathways to political participation. Unequal levels of social media social capital could result in unequal opportunities and motivations for political participation for different genders. In this sense, gendered patterns in social media social capital are not only descriptive differences but point to whose voices are more likely to be visible, heard, and mobilized in digital political spaces. This finding, on the one hand, underscores the importance of considering social media social capital when addressing gender divides in political engagement. On the other hand, it sheds light on future studies about how promoting social media capital might bridge resource-based disparities and enhance the mobilization of individuals' online social capital for civic engagement.

Additionally, our study has important practical implications. It has been observed that women's political empowerment could be facilitated by using social media and developing social capital. These digital platforms can provide women with a space where they may build both online and offline social connections, encouraging higher levels of political participation. This, somewhat, has been realized in our real-world communities (Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta, 2006), and our study expands on social media's potential as an engagement tool.

Our study, however, is not without limitations. One shortfall is that we did not consider the comparisons between online and offline settings, especially how social media capital might influence offline political behaviors as previous research did (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Second, the measure of online political participation does not fully distinguish between individually initiated actions and those coordinated through networks or organizations. Our survey captures self-reported individual behaviors but does not sufficiently identify whether respondents are acting as part of larger groups, campaigns, or movements. Although our inclusion of social media social capital is intended to approximate the role of individuals' networks and resources in enabling their online participation, future work could further separate these dimensions to provide a clearer account of organized versus individual forms of political action. Third, while treating social media as an entity offers advantages in addressing broader communication challenges, it is also important to recognize its multifaceted nature (Zhang et al., 2025). Future research should investigate platform differences and affordances, particularly in how they shape the development of social media social capital across genders. Relatedly, although we tested the dimensionality of our four-item social media social capital scale and found that a unidimensional structure was supported (see Appendix A, Tables A2 and A3), the lack of separation between bonding and bridging capital limits the ability to capture the multidimensionality in prior research.

As indicated in the method section, the online panel sample via Qualtrics enhances demographic representativeness but does not constitute a direct probability sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. Moreover, the mean score of political interest of this sample is a bit high, which might introduce some possible bias. This suggests that more respondents and additional investigations will be necessary to ensure representativeness. While the study focuses on a U.S. sample, we are intrigued by the potential generalization of such patterns across different contexts characterized by distinct social media environments and participatory forms. Future research could further investigate how cultural, institutional, and media-system differences shape the digital landscape in other contexts. Lastly, it is important to recognize that our findings cannot present a causal relationship. Existing studies have implied that social media use may increase capital, thus in turn explaining the increase in online participatory behavior in politics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Therefore, whether social media use promotes this new form of capital or in the opposite direction remains an unsolved issue. Further study may deploy panel surveys to explore these intricate dynamics.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Yingqi Pan:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Saifuddin Ahmed:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Mengxuan Cai:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ruolan Deng:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure of AI usage

The authors acknowledged the use of ChatGPT-4o (Open AI, May 2025 version, https://chat.openai.com/) to assist with grammar checking and language improvement. The AI tool was used to enhance clarity of the text. All content has been reviewed and verified by the authors to ensure accuracy and integrity.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Regression model of consumptive social media use in predicting online political participation.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)	.75 (.16)***	.64 (.16)***
Gender (1 = Women)[d]	−.10 (.04)*	.08 (.10)
Consumptive social media use	.11 (.01)***	.13 (.02)***
Age	−.01 (.00)***	−.01 (.00)***
Marital Status(1 = Others)[d]	−.02 (.04)	−.02 (.04)
Race: African American[d]	.17 (.06)**	.16 (.06)*
Race: Others[d]	−.16 (.06)**	−.16 (.06)**
Education	.07 (.02)***	.07 (.02)***
Income	−.00 (.01)	−.00 (.01)
Political interest	.11 (.02)***	.11 (.02)***
Political ideology	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)
Gender*consumptive social media use		−.05 (.02)*
R^2 (%)	29.9	30.3

Note: [d] means dummy variable; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

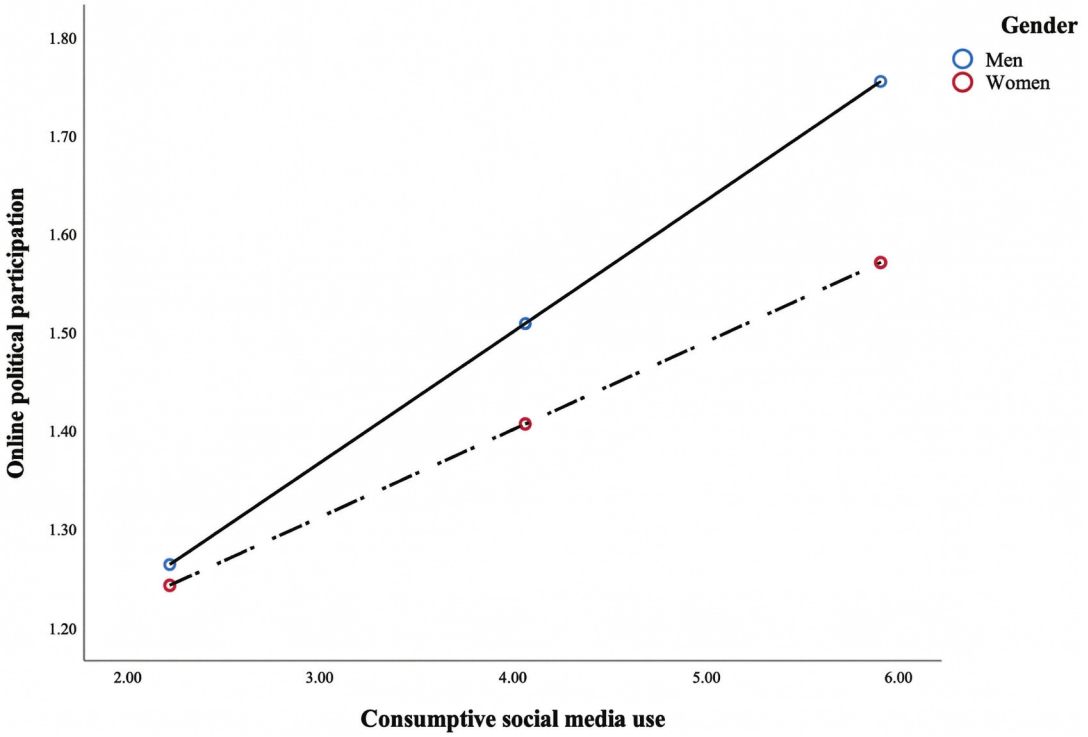


Figure A1. Two-way interactions between consumptive social media use and gender in predicting online political participation.

Table A2. Exploratory factor analysis of social media social capital items ($N = 714$).

Item	Loading	h^2	u^2
I frequently use social media to encourage conversations about solving community problems.	.89	.79	.21
I frequently use social media to encourage conversations about solving community problems.	.91	.82	.18
I frequently use social media to foster community values.	.91	.84	.16
I frequently use social media to connect community members to each other.	.90	.80	.20

Note. Extraction method = principal axis factoring; rotation = oblimin. All factor loadings ≥.89. One factor explained 81% of the variance.

Table A3. Confirmatory factor analysis fit indices for the social media social capital scale ($N = 714$).

Model	χ^2 (df)	CFI	TFI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR	Factor correlation
One-factor (all items)	31.57 (2)***	.999	.997	.14 [.10, .19]	.01	–
Two-factor (Bridging = items 1, 2; Bonding = items 3, 4)	2.56 (1)	1.000	1.000	.05 [.00, .12]	.003	.97***

Note. Estimator = WLSMV. All standardized factor loadings exceeded .93. In the two-factor model, the correlation between bonding and bridging was .97 ($p < .001$). Internal consistency of the unidimensional four-item scale was excellent (*Cronbach's* $\alpha = .95$; *McDonald's* $\omega = .95$). *** $p < .001$.

Table A4. Demographics characteristics of the sample ($N = 714$).

Demographics	Descriptive	Population by Characteristics (Source: Census Reporter 2020–2023)
Age	$M = 46.84$; $SD = 16.72$	Median = 39
Gender	Men = 55.7%, Women = 44.3%	Approx. 50.5% women, 49.5% men
Race	63.5% White, 16.7% African American, 12.4% Hispanics, 6% Asian, 0.7% Native American, 0.8% others	58.9% White, 18.6% Hispanic/Latino, 12.2% African American, 6% Asian, 1.1% Native American
Marital Status	33.8% single, 50.4% married/domestic partnership, 11% divorced, 3.9% widowed, 1% separated	50.2% married, 11% divorced, 27.6% never married
Education	From 1 = *no formal education* to 8 = *doctoral degree*; $M = 5.52$; $SD = 1.11$; Median = some college	89.6% high school graduate or higher, 35.7% bachelor's degree or higher
Monthly Household Income	From 1 = *less than $1,000* to 10 = *more than $20,000*; $M = 5.27$; $SD = 3.30$; Median = $5,000–$6,999	Median annual household income = $6,230 (Median annual household income = $74,755)
Political Interest	From 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*; $M = 3.55$; $SD = .98$	/
Political Ideology	From 1 = *extremely liberal* to 5 = *extremely conservative*; $M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.39$	/