



POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND DIGITAL MEDIA: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT AMONG MOROCCAN YOUTH

Abdelaaziz El Bakkali¹

Elhoucine Boualili²ⁱ

¹Dr.,

Media & Cultural Anthropology,
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University,
Fès, Morocco

orcid.org/0000-0002-0010-9802

²Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University,
Fès, Morocco

orcid.org/0009-0006-7620-7309

Abstract:

Over the past decades, most research on youth and political engagement has consistently indicated a deep-seated distrust and apathy among youth towards formal political participation. This trend is supported by descriptive data illustrating their low representativeness in institutional politics. Moreover, political party leaders have publicly confirmed this growing disengagement in Morocco during recent congresses and public meetings with citizens preceding the 2026 legislative election. In contrast to these institutional forms of participation, the increasing inclination of youths towards alternative- albeit informal-modes of political engagement remains significantly under-researched, particularly digital modes of political engagement among Moroccan youth. Indeed, youth are increasingly forming robust social networks through digital media as an alternative tool for political activism and to challenge mainstream political structures. In this context, this study highlights the transition from physical spaces to virtual arenas as primary venues for political expression among youth. Furthermore, it examines how the use of digital platforms for political communication influences and reshapes youth political identity in the new media era. Third, the study examines political content generated and circulated by Moroccan youth to confront and challenge dominant political discourse. To this end, and based on eight focus group discussions- representing different age, gender, educational background, and political affiliation- conducted with 60 M.A. students in Fez and Taza faculties, the study examines the lived experiences of some Moroccan youth- both digital activists and non-activists- to uncover their perceptions of how their counter-political discourse influences social change and public

ⁱ Correspondence: email elhoucine.boualili@usmba.ac.ma

opinion. Ultimately, the study's findings confirm the hybrid, episodic, resistant, and constrained nature of youth political participation- beyond mainstream discourses on political apathy and disenchantment- towards an understanding of alternative politics from below.

Keywords: Moroccan youth, digital activism, political identity, counter-discourse, alternative participation

1. Introduction

In the era of new media technologies, the growing inclination among youth to use digital platforms for political communication has significantly transformed modes of political engagement in Global South societies (Szadkowski et al., 2025). Concomitantly, with the evolving cultural and subcultural dynamics in the Moroccan youth context, alternative and informal forms of political participation, activism, and civic engagement have emerged notably. Collectively, these practices mark a novel culture of contention, disputation, contestation and resistance among youth internet users. Importantly, these modes of political engagement foster strong networking bonds among virtual communities, navigating the physical and the virtual geographic boundaries. In addition, the unprecedented growth of communication technologies has enabled social networks to facilitate interaction beyond the limits of time and space. As a result, this shift has given rise to a new generation of political activism and social change. It allows youth to transcend traditional institutional structures and relocate their collective action into alternative digital spaces and social networks (Desrues, 2012).

The growing tendency towards the use of digital platforms reflects youth efforts to subvert established political hierarchies and assert alternative forms of political engagement. Indeed, descriptive research has shown a causal relationship between the degree of digital media mobilization and the responsiveness of national governments to social movements and demands for change. This trend, in fact, is evident across the MENA region and North Africa, where digital resistance has influenced how states respond to citizen empowerment (Wheeler, 2017). Likewise, the impact of digital activism continues to grow (Yachoulti & Bailla, 2021; El Marzouki, 2019, with the internet becoming the preferred platform for social communication (Zaid *et al.*, 2011).

Despite growing interest in youth political engagement, limited research has examined how youth, as a distinct social category, develop behaviours and patterns of virtual social networking to reconstruct power relations and construct political identities. This innovative practice tends to challenge institutional politics by enabling political expression within a virtual public sphere.

Building on this premise, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- How do Moroccan youth use digital media to construct, negotiate, and express their political identity within the virtual public sphere?

- In what ways do youth-led digital practices challenge political exclusion and contest dominant institutional narratives in Morocco?
- How do Moroccan youth perceive the effectiveness and risks of digital activism in shaping public opinion and promoting inclusive political participation?

Accordingly, this paper has three objectives. First, it aims to explore how young people in the Global South utilize digital media to create new political identities. Second, it examines how Moroccan youth utilize digital platforms for political engagement and expression, thereby resisting mainstream politics and producing alternative discourses. Third, it examines the lived experiences of Moroccan youth, including both digital activists and non-activists, to understand their perceptions and attitudes toward the impact of their counter-political discourses on social change and public opinion.

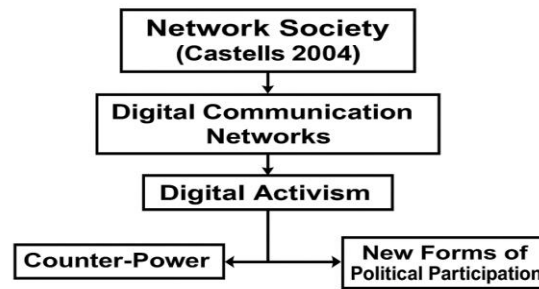
The significance of this study lies in its scholarly contribution to debates on youth, politics, and digital media. It specifically seeks to apply Castells' (2004, 2007, 2010 & 2011) frameworks to analyse how communication in the network society shapes political identities through the exercise of discursive power and counter-power. Furthermore, the study adopts focus group observation to examine the lived experiences of Moroccan university youth students. It pays close attention to their patterns of political participation and their perspectives on how digital counter-discourses influence social change and public perception. At the same time, the study draws on complementary perspectives, such as those of Loader *et al.* (2014), who conceptualize the "networked young citizen" as an individual expressing political agency through alternative forms of engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Revisiting Communication, Power, Social Networks and Youth Activism

According to Castells' (2007) theory of communication, power, and counter-power in the network society, digital platforms offer youth increased autonomy in political expression and the exertion of counter-power. As he notes, networked communication technologies shift power dynamics by empowering marginalized actors to engage in political and civic discourse beyond institutional confines and dominant narratives. In support of this theoretical lens, the conceptual diagram below offers a visual representation of Manuel Castells' (2004) theory of the network society, highlighting how digital communication technologies shape and reshape political activism, political agency, and civic engagement.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking Castells' Network Society to Digital Activism



Castells (2007) further describes this phenomenon as a new form of mass self-communication, interactive, decentralized, and self-directed, through which individuals produce and disseminate content globally within expansive networks. This process reconstructs public meaning in real-time and has a tangible impact on individuals' identities.

In this regard, individual profiles of internet users offer a detailed description of each member of the network. The virtual profile, according to Buckingham (2007), comprises distributed texts, messages, and videos that are accessible to other network members for commentary and interaction. These digital infrastructures create new communicative spaces that extend far beyond one's immediate social environment, transcending the limits of physical space and face-to-face communication.

In light of these developments, Loader *et al.* (2014) argue that “[t]he engagement of each new generation of young people with the practices and institutions of democratic governance in a society is an essential means by which such a political system retains its legitimacy” (p. 148). Accordingly, youth engagement through digital spaces is not merely communicative; it constitutes a foundational expression of democratic vitality and civic engagement.

2.2 Youth and the Shift towards the Virtual Public

Youth increasingly relocate their political practices to an alternative public sphere, which Zerhouni (2017) describes as “practicing politics from below”. These practices manifest as youth use digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Discord (particularly in the context of generation Z protests) to articulate grievances, express dissent, and construct collective identities across dispersed geographies. This convergence of digital tools and communicative practices blurs the boundaries between offline and online modes of participation, giving rise to hybrid forms of online and offline civic engagement and political activism (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2011).

Consequently, these practices allow youth to move from episodic to habitual forms of political participation, while simultaneously exerting counter-power, “[...] enacting the interest and values of those in subordinate positions in the social organization” (Castells, 2011, pp. 773-774). Youth use digital tools not only to resist exclusion but also to explore and embody new political identities beyond conventional discourse. In

addition, these hybrid practices reflect emerging political norms characteristic of “the networked young citizen” (Loader *et al.*, 2014).

Specifically in the Moroccan context, youth exhibit resistant and subversive behaviours, such as the use of pseudonyms, engagement in meme culture, and what has been described as political “charger” cultures, particularly evident in digital boycott campaigns. Although digital posts are often ephemeral, they are rapidly disseminated and widely circulated, enabling Moroccan youth to express dissent, assert visibility, and navigate the risks of censorship and surveillance. In this vein, youth demonstrate a growing tendency toward resistant discourse by using image memes to generate subversive and contesting digital content that represents political opposition. This content is broadly shared across digital platforms. The figure below illustrates examples of these highly circulated image memes commonly found on Moroccan digital platforms.

Figure 2: Image Memes Circulated by Moroccan Youth on Digital Platforms in 2024 and 2025



Source: Digital Platforms

The above memes, widely circulated across Moroccan digital networks and now popular tools to engage with public discourse (Milner, 2013), reflect a distinct mode of informal self-expression and a rejection of old-style politics. While often perceived as trivial, the pictorial and textual diffusion of such content wields significant influence, occasionally prompting reactions from the state. In fact, these images symbolize youth activism by fusing visual culture with political commentary, forming a multimodal discourse that extends beyond traditional protest repertoires. Moreover, the use of identity symbols such as the Moroccan flag deepens the sense of collective belonging. Thus, these practices indicate that Moroccan identity in digital media is not rigid; rather, it is open to modernity, maintains its deep-rooted authenticity, and is constantly renewing itself, granting it a transnational dimension.

This symbolic use of imagery is further illustrated in concrete campaigns that have stirred both public attention and institutional response. For example, the first image on the left promotes a popular boycott campaign targeting seafood. It depicts the background of a market or shop displaying various types of fish and seafood, with a red circle and diagonal line (a prohibition symbol) in the foreground, accompanied by the phrase “We boycott” written in bold black Arabic font. Both the visual and written

discourses represented in the image convey not only individual but also collective resistance, with the aim of social change and through challenging mainstream political discourse through non-mainstream channels (Castells, 2007). This boycott campaign aims to exert pressure on the government to tighten control over the lobbies that manipulate fish prices.

Reinforcing the socio-political resonance of such campaigns, in one of his episodes on the YouTube channel *Kalam fi Assiyassa* (Talk in Politics), journalist Taoufik Bouachrine titled the episode "*Abdelilah, the Phenomenon, Brought down the Government with a Fish*". (This episode is available on the YouTube channel.) As an influential journalist and a fierce critic of the government's political management, consistently voicing demands for social justice on behalf of Moroccan citizens, Bouachrine appears to implicitly show solidarity with the campaign led by the young fish vendor from Marrakesh. This vendor exposed the hidden truth about the actual wholesale prices of fish and how intermediaries and seafood lobbies inflate prices for ordinary consumers. Following the widespread public support for the campaign, both online and in the streets, where people flocked to buy fish from the young man's modest shop, the Ministry of Interior dispatched price control committees to investigate the matter.

In contrast to this bottom-up, citizen-led digital activism, the fifth image on the left captures a group of Moroccan youth attending a session in the Moroccan House of Councillors. The report, produced by the official Moroccan channel M24, reflects a top-down institutional discourse that reinforces the numerical representation of youth within formal political structures. Typically, classical media programs portray youth political engagement using descriptive and numerical membership, along with variations in youths' age and gender. However, this remains a strategy aimed at minimizing the potential impact of youth digital political activism on the broader public. Furthermore, the mainstream political discourse prioritizes the dominance of traditional media narratives over those counter-discourses emerging from digital platforms.

Nevertheless, despite criticisms concerning the informality and perceived political illegitimacy of their actions, youth-led digital practices, including hashtags, petitions, and boycotts, bridge the formal and informal realms of participation. In doing so, they assert agency in the face of institutional exclusion. As Hirzalla and van Zoonen (2011) explain, "*agency can vary within politics and activism; individuals may engage either through direct membership (e.g., party activism or volunteering) or without formal membership (e.g., voting or joining a demonstration)*" (p. 485). This duality of engagement, therefore, helps contextualize the hybrid participatory landscape evident among Moroccan youth.

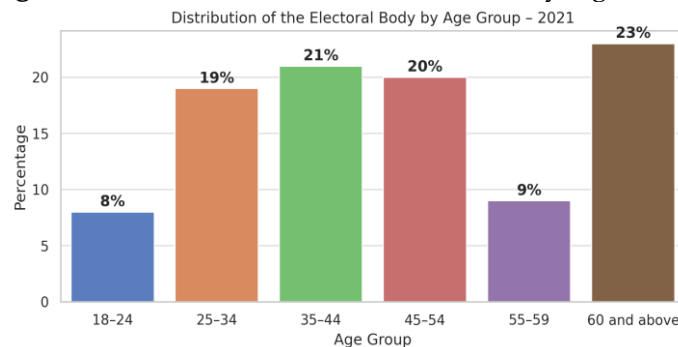
In this context, the digital activism of Moroccan youth mirrors this tension. Whereas official actors use media to consolidate authority, youth employ digital tools to produce counter-discourses that challenge dominant narratives and contest political marginalization.

2.3 From Political Exclusion to Digital Participation: The Experiences of Moroccan Youth

According to DataReportal (2025), Morocco had 35.3 million internet users and 21.3 million active social media users by early 2025, representing 55.5% of the population, with 79.8% of adults using social media. Youth activism is primarily concentrated in urban areas, where internet access is widely available. This connectivity enables high rates of content generation and public engagement, transcending the limitations of traditional media. Notably, youth aged 15-34 make up 29.5% of Morocco's population, a digitally literate and politically aware demographic with a pronounced desire for justice and inclusion.

Persistent marginalization of youth in institutional politics, coupled with low voter turnout and minimal engagement with political parties (Zerhouni & Akasbi, 2016), has led many young people to turn to digital platforms for political expression, distancing themselves from mainstream politics and reinforcing their systemic exclusion. The bar chart below presents the age distribution of elected officials based on the 2021 legislative elections, highlighting the underrepresentation of young people in formal political institutions.

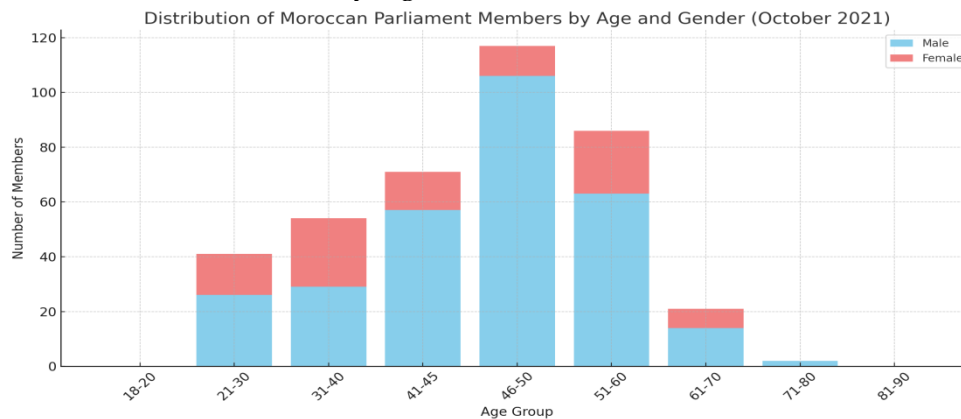
Figure 3: Distribution of Elected Officials by Age – 2021



Source: <http://www.elections.ma/>

This chart illustrates the age distribution of Morocco's electoral body in 2021. It reveals that older citizens constitute a larger share of registered voters, with those aged 60 and above representing 23% of the electorate. By contrast, young people aged 18–24 account for only 8%. This disparity highlights the demographic imbalance in electoral participation, suggesting that older age groups have a stronger numerical presence in the political process. In light of Morocco's most recent parliamentary elections, held in September 2021, the second graph presents data on youth political representation and the age distribution of parliamentarians.

Figure 4. Distribution of the Moroccan Parliament Members by Age and Gender- October 2021



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Database, 2021 Electoral Data

It is evident that although voter turnout marginally increased in 2021 to 50.86%, this figure conceals the impact of widespread online boycott campaigns and Moroccan youths' disenchantment with institutional politics (Zerhouni & Akesbi, 2016). These campaigns reflect a broader critique of institutional legitimacy among Moroccan youth, who increasingly perceive democratic processes as exclusionary, and disconnected from their lived realities. Across the MENA region, the Arab Spring served as a watershed moment for youth digital mobilization. It ushered in new forms of digital and online resistance (El Marzouki, 2019), characterized by immediacy, autonomy, and horizontality. These developments facilitated the emergence of civic movements rooted in networked publics and digitally enabled coalitions. In the Moroccan context, this transition became visible through digitally coordinated protests against inflation, drought, and corporate consumer practices, demonstrating innovative uses of media to reach broad audiences and provoke state responses.

As long as youths' under-representation in institutional politics is a pervasive phenomenon, the habitual and frequent use of digital platforms stimulates youths' curiosity, prompting a shift from face-to-face to virtual communication in politics. This transition enables youths to innovate powerful and effective modes of digital interaction through information exchange and pragmatic political practices. Moreover, the current debate on the duality of online versus offline politics, occurring in different public spaces among youth activists, shapes their physical and digital behaviours in ways that fuse the physical and the virtual or transcend both, resulting in hybrid participation patterns in politics.

Youth participate in cultural and political events as agents of change, demonstrating a strong sense of belonging and engagement through digital media. This marks a shift towards new communication modes, influenced by alternative subcultures, the power of digital content, and the impact of youth online forums and groups, ranging from small communities to broad ones with a discernible influence on public opinion.

This review highlights the transformative capacity of digital media in shaping youth political agency, activism, and identity within the network society. It explores major scholarly perspectives at the nexus of youth and digital political engagement, emphasizing how online spaces empower young people to express political concerns, assert visibility, and cultivate alternative forms of participation. Special attention is given to how the concepts of youth, engagement, and activism are theorized in the Global South, drawing on empirical insights from the Moroccan youth context.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, experience-centred narrative methodology to investigate how Moroccan youth participate in political activism through digital media. Consistent with the theoretical framework of Castells (2007, 2011), which emphasizes communication as a form of power and counter-power within networked societies, this approach enables the examination of how youth construct political identities and practices in digitally mediated environments. Given the study's focus on lived experience, identity formation, and perceptions of exclusion and inclusion, a narrative framework enables participants to articulate meaning from their socio-political realities.

To operationalize this narrative approach, focus groups are employed as an effective method for gathering data. As Wilkinson (2004) notes, focus groups are instrumental when the purpose of the research is to elicit people's perceptions of and attitudes toward specific public issues, the meanings associated with them, and the way individuals understand and negotiate them in a particular social environment. Accordingly, this method is particularly relevant to the study's aim of capturing how digital spaces function as arenas for both political expression and resistance, as emphasized in the literature on youth activism. To collect rich and contextualized data, eight focus group discussions were conducted: Four with Master's students from the Legal Department at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez and four with students from the Polydisciplinary Faculty of Taza, representing a total of 60 participants. The Fez groups consisted of 32 participants (19 males and 13 females), all of whom were between 22 and 34 years old. The Taza groups consisted of 28 participants (13 males and 15 females), also aged between 22 and 36. Importantly, each group was mixed-gender to ensure diversity and inclusivity of perspectives, reflecting the multiplicity of political voices among Moroccan youth.

For organizational purposes, each focus group was divided into four small groups with no more than eight mixed-gender participants per group. Discussions were moderated by the principal researchers, supported by a colleague, while the moderator took notes. To foster authentic engagement, all discussions were held in Arabic, with flexibility for both standard and colloquial varieties. This approach supported linguistic inclusion, allowing participants to express themselves in ways that resonated with their cultural identity and everyday communication practices.

Moreover, participants were assured they could speak freely and without judgment, creating an environment conducive to open dialogue and reflexive engagement. As Rabiee (2004) explains, "*Focus groups could provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals*" (p. 656). In this regard, focus groups became a site for collective meaning-making, aligned with Castells' emphasis on networked public spheres where power is expressed dialogically and horizontally.

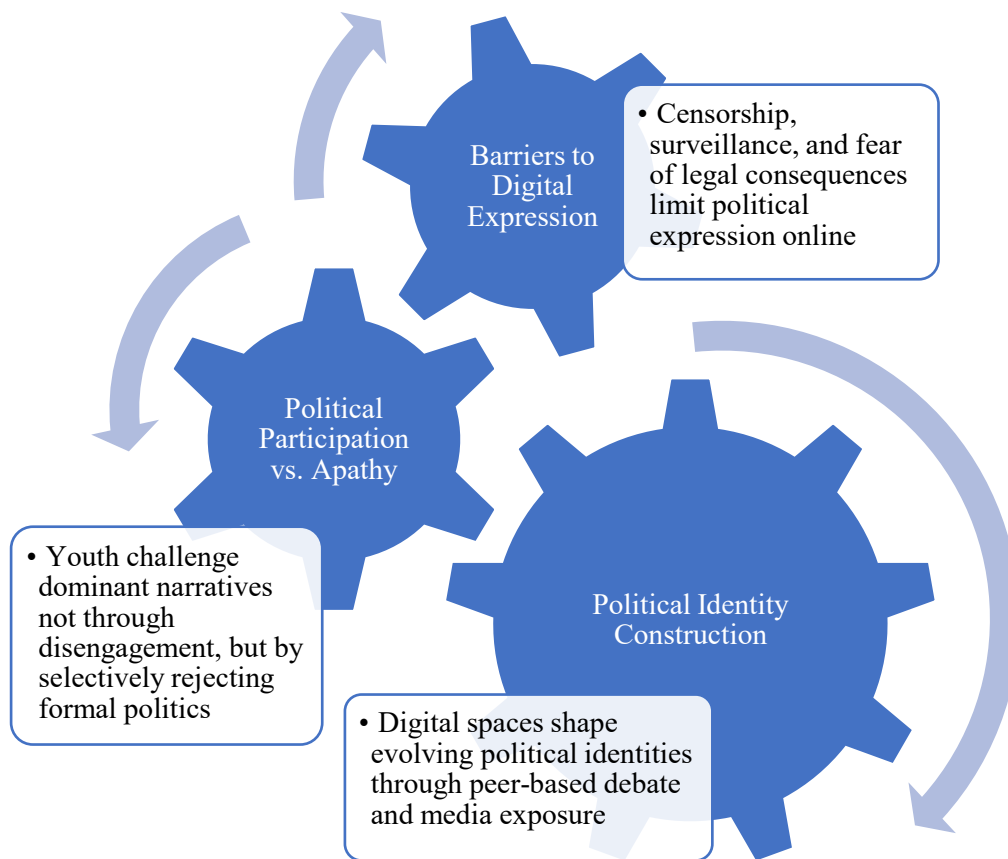
Each session lasted approximately 52 minutes and was audio-recorded with oral consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic narrative analysis, chosen for their capacity to foreground how individuals construct meaning through storytelling (Andrews *et al.*, 2013). This method further complements the theoretical framing, as it highlights not only what is said but also how political subjectivity and resistance are discursively constructed in networked settings.

Significantly, the choice of a purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure thematic relevance. Participants were selected based on educational level (postgraduate), field of study (primarily law and political science), gender balance, and expressed interest in digital activism. Students who declined to participate or lacked interest in the topic were excluded, ultimately resulting in a sample that was demographically diverse, politically aware, and digitally concerned.

3.2 Data Analysis

As a first step in the analysis, transcripts were reviewed through exploratory listening and open note-taking to identify emerging themes and keywords. In the next stage, subsequent readings traced patterns, behaviours, agreement and disagreement, contradictions, and "*small narratives*", as in the case of the participant who was offered a bribe to vote in the elections -brief but revealing narrative segments that shed light on participants' political perceptions and behaviours (Andrews *et al.*, 2013). Through this process, the analysis of focus group narratives revealed several interrelated themes that collectively deepen our understanding of Moroccan youth's digital political engagement and their modes of political activism, while also unravelling their attitudes towards concerns about the political discourses circulated on digital platforms. Before delving into a thorough analysis of some respondents' responses in light of the focus group discussions, it is important to map out some of the recurrent themes that emerged, along with the study's major questions.

Figure 5. Key themes in Moroccan youth digital political engagement based on focus group analysis



Source: Fieldwork

The above diagram represents the major themes, located in the blue zones (cyclic formats), and the subthemes, highlighted in the attached squares. The diagram illustrates the intersectional and interrelated nature of political identity, political participation, and the stumbling blocks of political expression. Moreover, this representation further indicates the spiral and cyclical nature of the major themes and subthemes, such as the power of digital space for self-expression and identity formation, the resistance to formal political discourses through alternative and informal ones, and the limitations of political expression within the virtual space.

3.3 The Construction of Political Identity

Participants' opinions and personal narratives were notably diverse, yet specific recurring threads emerged that directly map onto the study's guiding questions and Castells' (2007, 2011) framework for analysing how communication in the network society shapes political identities through the exercise of discursive power and counter-power.

Discussions suggest that political identity among youth is not fixed but dynamic and changeable, shaped by both early life experiences and evolving digital interactions.

Political identity emerged as an essential theme in the focus group discussions. This theme directly aligns with Research Question 1: How do Moroccan youth utilize digital media to construct, negotiate, and express their political identity within the virtual public sphere? The theme highlights participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward the digital space and its impact on identity formation, particularly in light of the under-representation of youth in institutional politics. As the discussions progressed, subthemes such as resistance and contestation, reactions, actions, participation, and non-participation emerged organically.

One participant, identifying as a university activist, explained:

"As a university student activist, digital platforms allow me to express my views freely, at least with my peers, by posting, commenting, and sharing. Sometimes, I express my views publicly through textual and visual content. Joining political debates on digital platforms-specifically, partisan online meetings and youth forums or campaigns-helps one change one's views on surrounding events, either positively or negatively. This is part of the constructed political identity as changeable over time."

This account highlights that networked spaces facilitate the construction and evolution of political identities through dialogic, peer-based engagement. In contrast, another participant expressed a more static view of political identity: *"Participating or interacting by writing a comment on a social media platform does not change my political identity, because my political identity has been formed with me since childhood."* According to this participant, the issue of identity construction cannot be confined to a digital media post; instead, political identity is something broader than that.

Shifting to the impact of political discourse on shaping youths' political views and perceptions about politics, one female participant from a different focus group shared:

"Yes, I believe that digital political engagement, facilitated through digital tools and social media, has an impact on social change, political discourse, and the political identity and attitudes of youth. I believe that the Justice and Development Party, under the leadership of Abdelilah Benkirane, helped reconcile Moroccans with politics. I am one of those who closely follow his speeches... Despite the populist nature of his political discourses, Abdelilah Benkirane's speeches address people in their language -the popular, colloquial dialect that his audience understands. This language and this discourse influence public opinion and attract many new party members as well as sympathy for its program."

This participant strongly supports Benkirane's political discourse, expressing admiration for its popular and accessible nature, as it speaks directly to the concerns of ordinary citizens. The popularity of Benkirane on social media thus reflects not only partisan messaging but also active political opposition in the digital public sphere. These divergent perspectives highlight the complexity of political subjectivity and agency in the digital age. Youth convictions about politics and political practice are clearly diverse.

However, it is also evident that factors such as age, gender, occupation, political interest, and affiliation or non-affiliation significantly influence participants' political views and preferred figures. To sum up, political identity among Moroccan youth appears both resilient and adaptable, reflecting continuity and transformation in response to personal, social, and digital contexts.

3.4 Political Participation and Non-Participation

A recurring theme was political apathy toward formal politics. Participants voiced deep distrust in institutional political practice, insisting that the content and discourse of political parties often serve electoral agendas and fail to reflect youth concerns. This theme is strongly related to the following research question: In what ways do youth-led digital practices challenge political exclusion and contest dominant institutional narratives in Morocco? Despite top-down discourses portraying youth as politically disengaged, disinterested, or apathetic, participants' views on the binary of political engagement and disengagement reveal a more nuanced understanding of the political spectrum. In fact, they demonstrate a strong sense of civic responsibility as Moroccan citizens, even while acknowledging the barriers to participation. As one female participant explained:

"The political discourse diffused by political parties is just a means to attract the attention of youth as a political mass."

This intervention highlights that youth are critically aware of the types of discourses circulated by partisan channels on digital platforms such as podcasts, videos, and social media campaigns. However, according to the participant, these messages primarily target a specific segment of affiliated youth, leaving many others disengaged. She further stated:

"I do not belong to any political party, nor have I ever been a member of one. I have never voted for any party because of the false promises they make. I have also never participated in any elections so far. There is a sense of despair among youth regarding political parties."

Agreeing with the above perception, a male participant shared a personal experience that highlights his distrust and detachment from institutional politics: *"I was once offered a bribe to vote for a particular party, but I refused and did not vote."* These expressions reflect a clear alignment with Zerhouni and Akesbi's (2016) concept of youth political disenchantment, as well as with Zerhouni's (2017) notion of *"politics from below"* - a form of intentional disengagement from institutional politics that simultaneously fosters alternative modes of participation, motivated by youths' will to exert pressure on formal structures for social change. In this view, Moroccan youth do not withdraw from political life out of apathy, but rather as an active rejection of top-down, exclusionary systems that fail to represent their interests. This aligns with Meijer's idea that *"for many*

young people, rejecting siyasa is related to a rejection of the political classes” (p. 150). Indeed, politics is a domain wherein power relations are highly manifested. As a result, minority groups’ inability to access the political public, historically dominated by privileged groups, deepens their marginalisation and disempowerment within the cultural sphere as a public space.

3.5 Barriers to Political Expression on Digital Platforms

Despite the perceived openness of digital platforms, many participants reported that censorship and legal fears limited their political expression. One male participant stated: *“I do not use digital platforms for any political activity out of fear of legal prosecution... which could be punishable by law.”* This statement highlights the tension between digital freedom and legal constraint. In light of the focus group debate, the targeted sample of youth-including students from a Master’s program specializing in legal sciences-demonstrated full awareness of the legal consequences tied to producing or sharing content that may involve defamation, insult, or incitement.

Most participants expressed interest in engaging with purposeful digital content that respects others’ privacy and public security, without compromising societal stability. Significantly, one participant cited examples of Moroccan influencers who faced legal prosecution due to statements or interactions on digital platforms that failed to comply with national legal regulations.

3.6 Youth Perceptions of Institutional Politics

Participants repeatedly expressed a feeling of systemic exclusion and policy neglect (Kadi, 2019). This was reflected in questions such as: *“What policies are actually directed toward youth?”* Such statements reveal how youth facing institutional marginalization turn to digital tools not only for expression but also for asserting alternative forms of civic participation. This further confirms Castells’ (2011) assertion that power, unless challenged, reproduces domination and that counter-power must operate in new spaces, such as the digital sphere. This sense of alienation was echoed in another participant's critique of the political domain:

“The political arena is in decline, and one clear indication of this is that, according to previous statistics, around one hundred members of parliament do not hold a high school diploma. What can we expect from them when, for example, we hear the Speaker of the House of Representatives telling MPs: ‘If you don’t know how to write your name, hand your attendance sheets to a colleague to write it for you’? How can we expect political change that truly impacts society and reality with such a level of competence?”

The above statement symbolizes a profound critique of the declining legitimacy of the political spectrum. The reference to *“around one hundred members of parliament”* lacking even a high school diploma illustrates not only a dominant phenomenon of unqualified representatives, but also raises questions about the capacity of legislative bodies to

generate meaningful political change as representatives of citizens' concerns. Along with the same thought, another participant insisted on the ethical and practical imperative for youth engagement:

"The necessary reaction is that youth, especially those with advanced education in fields such as medicine, economics, and academia, must get involved in political parties, not for personal gain but for social change and practicing politics according to ethical principles. When you are unwilling to fight corruption, you are essentially encouraging a corrupt political and social environment. We must have integrity and courage to stand up for our political positions."

This view reflects a belief that the political domain is sometimes marked by educational illiteracy, lack of competence, and moral compromise. The participant provides a concrete example of representatives who lack basic literacy skills, which undermines their ability to fulfill their legislative roles. In this context, the participant calls for the active engagement of highly educated youth in political life, not for individual advancement, but to transform the political system and uphold integrity.

3.7 Resistance and Contestation

The theme of resistance through discourse and counter-discourses highlights the use of digital platforms as virtual spaces for opposing mainstream politics and power negotiation. During this advanced phase of the focus group discussions, the researchers introduced participants to samples of boycott campaigns organized on various platforms. These campaigns represent new forms of social movements and were used to prompt participants to share their thoughts, provide illustrative responses, and reflect on their experiences, thereby yielding rich and contextually grounded data. In response, one male participant, declaring himself an activist, shared:

"In light of this grim reality and the ongoing political exclusion of youth from within political institutions, political discourse, particularly that of political parties, remains important. However, Moroccan youth, from time to time, take to social media platforms to express their opinions, defend their rights, and criticize government performance. Therefore, digital media remains a platform for expressing ideas and concerns, and for making youth voices heard by those in charge. The goal is to influence public policies and produce alternative political discourses that can have an impact on government management."

This testimony further illustrates the potential of digital media and the network society for self-expression, interaction, and resistance to domination (Castells, 2011) through identity discourse. Digital platforms grant youth communicative agency and access to alternative political spaces, allowing them to contest dominant narratives, articulate dissent, and engage in forms of counter-power.

In light of the above themes and participant interventions, the word map below illustrates the most frequently occurring and prominent words used across the focus group discussions.

Figure 5. Word map on key concepts emerging from participants' focus group interventions



Source: Fieldwork.

Central terms such as “political,” “youth,” “digital,” “identity,” “platforms,” “change,” and “discourse,” among others, reflect the participants’ recurring emphasis on the role of digital platforms in shaping political expression and constructing political identity.

4. Discussion

The present study unravels the manifestations of Moroccan youth political activism in the age of new media. It further explores how the alternative forms of youth civic engagement and social movements, albeit informal, shape their construction of a resistant and contesting political identity. Moroccan youth digital activism embodies hybrid, fluid, and typical modes of political engagement, highlighting youths' combination of online and offline civic activities in forms of political participation (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2011). Their participation is seasonal and episodic, yet intentional, shaped by frustration with institutional politics and the youths’ tendency to practice “politics from below” (Zerhouni & Akesbi, 2016), and empowered by the communicative potential of digital media.

While Moroccan youth digital activism demonstrates creativity and agency, it is important to consider its limitations. Online participation is shaped by risks such as surveillance, misinformation, and unequal access to digital tools, which can constrain its effectiveness. Moreover, youth engagement is often episodic and seasonal, raising questions about its long-term impact and sustainability. Although these practices enable identity formation and counter-discourse, they may not always translate into structural political change. Recognizing these vulnerabilities provides a more balanced understanding of digital activism, highlighting both its potential and its constraints.

This hybrid potential transcends institutional barriers by giving rise to virtual publics that form collective social networks. This perception aligns with Loader *et al.*'s (2014) concept of "*the networked citizen*," who engages with political discourse and practice through alternative, non-institutional modes, forming horizontal networks of communication and collective action to exert influence over power structures (Castells, 2007). The focus group data, reflecting some university students' attitudes, further confirm the idea that youths are transforming their use of digital media for identity formation and self-expression-resisting, albeit outside political settings, against mainstream partisan discourse as a pattern of practicing participatory politics from below.

As the findings show, youth are not passive recipients of political narratives; instead, they are active constructors of counter-discourses that emerge within what Castells (2007) refers to as "*mass self-communication networks*", serving the interests, values, and political aspirations of individuals or groups occupying lower or marginalized positions within the social structure. For instance, by sharing and diffusing memes to engage with public discourse (Milner, 2013), youth further resist the perpetuation of political illiteracy in institutional spaces. Moreover, by leveraging colloquial digital discourse and blurring the boundaries between offline and online social movements, they exemplify the kind of discursive counter-power embedded in digital activism.

Moreover, the legal and structural barriers to institutional politics identified in participant narratives also align with Drhimeur's (2022) and Yachoulti & Bailla's (2021) findings, which reveal that Moroccan youth face a restrictive political environment despite their growing online engagement. Additionally, the youth's resistance to institutional discourse and their preference for digital tools as platforms for political self-expression also illustrate Zerhouni's (2017) concept of "*practicing politics from below*".

5. Conclusion

This study has aimed to explore the evolving nature of youth political engagement in the digital age, particularly within the Moroccan context. Finally, based on eight focus group discussions conducted with 60 university students in Fez and Taza faculties, the study has examined the lived experiences of some Moroccan youth, both digital activists and non-activists, to uncover their perceptions of how their counter-political discourse influences social change and public opinion. The study's findings not only confirm but also extend previous theories by offering nuanced, empirical support for the hybrid, episodic, resistant, and constrained nature of youth political participation. In alignment with the study's theoretical orientation, it specifically seeks to apply Castells' (2004, 2007, 2009 & 2011) frameworks to analyse how communication in the network society shapes political identities through the exercise of discursive power and counter-power.

These findings give rise to several important implications. Among them is the need to legalize youth use of digital platforms for political activism in order to support

formal political practices. Additionally, political participation ought to be taught in school curricula to make citizens aware of the significance of political engagement and to instill in them the values of participatory citizenship and political culture. Political parties also have a central role to play in training youth on the values of good citizenship and participatory politics. This includes the need to democratize the political sphere through structured training sessions aimed at reconciling youth with political parties.

Another important implication is the acknowledgement of youth subcultures as part and parcel of mainstream political culture. Such recognition would allow youth to make a political impact from within institutional politics and participate in political decision-making beyond a mere numerical or symbolic presence. These measures collectively point to the necessity of bridging the gap between informal youth-led political practices and formal institutions by recognizing, supporting, and institutionalizing youth agency as an integral component of democratic transformation in Morocco.

Building on these findings, this study advocates a novel investigation of the reasons behind the phenomenal transition to digital political engagement among youth, aiming to understand the essence of youth digital experiences in the light of their perceptions. It also explains how they exist hand in hand with youth intentions towards them and their specificities in the Moroccan cultural context. However, this area remains significantly under-researched, and future research should be centred on these digital practices and their socio-cultural meanings.

This study is not without limitations. First, as the study is qualitative, the sample comprises 60 university students from two faculties located at the regional level (Fez-Meknes region). For this reason, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of Moroccan university students across all universities and higher education institutions. Second, the study relies on self-reported data collected during focus group discussions, and the expressed views may not necessarily reflect the perceptions of all group members, as the context of collective discussion can shape responses.

Given the complexity of youth digital experiences in the context in which they exist and evolve, both external factors related to the cultural and political environment and internal factors related to how Moroccan youth are connected to digital platforms for political participation practices seem essential to explore, understand, and analyse in future research.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Abdelaaziz El Bakkali is an associate professor of language and cultural studies at the faculty of letters Dhar Mehraz, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University – Fez. He is a Fulbright Alumni of the US Department of State-sponsored scholarship and a visiting scholar to the University of Delaware, USA, where he led many research projects.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0010-9802>

Elhoucine Boualili is a PhD student at the “Cultures, Représentations, Education, Didactique & Ingénierie de Formation” research lab, Dhar El Mehraz, Fez. His research focuses on youth political participation via digital media, exploring how digital platforms shape political engagement and activism. He holds an M.A. in Women’s and Gender Studies.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7620-7309>

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