

# **Risk-Aware Political Participation in Arab Digital Publics**

## **Negotiated Expression under Conditions of Visibility**

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# Introduction

- ▶ Social media is now a key space for political participation
- ▶ This study explores how visibility and risk awareness shape political engagement online
- ▶ It focuses on X, TikTok, and Instagram
- ▶ It is guided by Social Identity Theory and Networked Publics Theory



# The Core Problem



- Digital political participation is often measured through visible expression
- Reduced visibility is often interpreted as disengagement
- Platform environments increase visibility, exposure, and audience unpredictability
- Argument: Political participation is often negotiated rather than absent

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# Research Gap

- ▶ Research often privileges mobilization and connective action
- ▶ High-visibility activism receives greater attention
- ▶ Calibrated everyday participation remains under-theorized
- ▶ Participation under perceived risk requires clearer conceptualization

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# Theoretical Framework

- **Political participation is structured by three dynamics:**
  - Platform visibility
  - Audience uncertainty (context collapse)
  - Perceived legal, social, and reputational risks

These dynamics produce risk-aware participation and negotiated expression

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# From Self-Censorship to Negotiated Expression

- ▶ Chilling-effects research often links risk to silence
- ▶ Self-censorship emphasizes speech suppression
- ▶ This study argues that expression is recalibrated rather than withdrawn
- ▶ Risk awareness becomes a structuring condition of participation



# Methodology

- ▶ Qualitative interpretive research design
- ▶ 20 semi-structured interviews with social media users across several Arab countries
- ▶ Purposive sampling to ensure variation in age, gender, and online engagement
- ▶ Supplementary observation of political conversations on X, TikTok, and Instagram
- ▶ Interpretive thematic analysis used to identify recurring patterns across interviews and platform data

# Participant Diversity

<b>Category</b>	<b>Overview</b>
<b>Age range</b>	<b>18-54</b>
<b>Regional clusters</b>	<b>Gulf, Eastern Arab region, North Africa</b>
<b>Professional backgrounds</b>	<b>Students, academics, journalists, civil society, public/private sector</b>
<b>Engagement levels</b>	<b>Active commentary, selective participation, observation</b>

Risk-aware participation was observed across demographic and professional differences



# Finding 1: Political Sense-Making

- ▶ Social media functioned as spaces of political interpretation rather than overt activism
- ▶ Participants monitored debates and selectively amplified content
- ▶ Political presence often occurred without explicit positioning
- ▶ Participation was embedded in everyday communicative routines



## Finding 2: Calibrated Participation

- ▶ Participants evaluated potential social and professional consequences
- ▶ Engagement became conditional and topic-sensitive
- ▶ Participants relied on indirect commentary, ambiguity, and resharing practices
- ▶ Participants used audience segmentation and visibility management
- ▶ Participation persisted through strategic recalibration

# Platform Logics and Variation

<b>Platform</b>	<b>Typical visibility dynamic</b>	<b>Common practice</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>Broader exposure and argumentative exchange</b>	<b>Indirect commentary and selective resharing</b>
<b>TikTok</b>	<b>Affective and symbolic communication</b>	<b>Humour, symbolism, and implicit political cues</b>
<b>Instagram</b>	<b>Relational visibility and bounded audiences</b>	<b>Audience segmentation and selective sharing</b>

Negotiated expression was shaped by platform-specific visibility logics

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# Theoretical Contribution

- ▶ Challenges binary models of engagement and disengagement
- ▶ Introduces risk-aware participation as an analytical lens
- ▶ Defines negotiated expression as an adaptive political practice
- ▶ Reframes caution as transformation rather than withdrawal

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# Implications and Conclusion

- ▶ Political participation is increasingly visibility-conditioned
- ▶ Risk awareness shapes how engagement is performed
- ▶ Standard metrics may miss indirect, low-visibility, and audience-segmented participation
- ▶ Future research should refine indicators of calibrated participation across different contexts