

# DIGITAL MINIMALISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: ANALYZING LOW SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE RATES AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN JAPANESE YOUTH

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## Abstract

Japan presents a distinctive case in the comparative study of digital media and democratic participation: despite high smartphone penetration, Japanese adults aged 18–35 report the lowest average daily social media usage (approximately 225 minutes) among surveyed developed nations, with a striking structural dominance of Line, a closed, interpersonal messaging platform, over open public discourse platforms. This study investigates how this pattern of 'digital minimalism,' defined here as below-average voluntary reduction in public-facing social media engagement, shapes news consumption, political polarization exposure, and civic participation among Japanese youth. Drawing on a large-scale cross-platform survey (n = 1,500; ages 18–35; six prefectures), this study compares civic engagement profiles across three platform-use groups: Line-dominant users, X (formerly Twitter)-dominant users, and multi-platform users. Results indicate that Line-dominant users report higher rates of electoral participation (41.3%) and community volunteering (28.7%) compared to X-dominant users (33.8% and 19.4%, respectively), despite lower scores on news consumption and political interest indices. Logistic regression analysis identifies daily online time as a significant negative predictor of voting participation (OR = 0.996,  $p < .01$ ), while political interest and news consumption remain positive predictors across groups. Polarization exposure scores are substantially lower among Line-dominant users and negatively predict voting participation (OR = 0.83,  $p < .05$ ). The findings suggest that civic engagement in a low-polarization digital environment takes qualitatively different forms, emphasizing local, community-based participation over partisan political activism. These results challenge prevailing assumptions that higher social media engagement universally promotes democratic participation and invite reconceptualization of the relationship between digital minimalism and civic health.

**Keywords:** *digital minimalism, civic engagement, Japanese youth, social media, political participation, polarization, Line, democratic participation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between social media use and democratic participation has generated a substantial and contested body of scholarship over the past two decades. A dominant strand of this literature holds that social media platforms, by lowering the costs of information access, enabling horizontal communication, and facilitating collective action, should, in principle, enhance civic engagement, particularly among younger citizens (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2015). A competing strand emphasizes the countervailing mechanisms: algorithmic amplification of affective and partisan

content, the narrowing of information diets through filter bubbles, and the substitution of 'slacktivism' for substantive political participation (Settle, 2018; Bail et al., 2018).

Both strands of this debate have been developed almost exclusively in the context of Western liberal democracies, primarily the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, where high social media penetration and intense partisan polarization are the empirical backdrop. Japan presents a structurally different case that has received comparatively little theoretical attention. Despite near-universal smartphone adoption among youth and a high-income, highly educated population, Japan consistently records among the lowest average daily social media usage times of any surveyed developed nation. The 2024 DataReportal Global Digital Overview places Japan's average daily online time at approximately three hours and forty-five minutes, the lowest among the 50 countries surveyed, and social media-specific engagement at roughly three hours and seven minutes per day (DataReportal, 2024). Within this already constrained digital environment, Line, a closed, end-to-end encrypted messaging application that functions primarily as an interpersonal and small-group communication tool, commands the highest penetration and most frequent use, with approximately 96 million active monthly users in Japan as of 2024 (Line Corporation, 2024).

This structural configuration has significant theoretical implications. Line's architecture, private channels, no algorithmic public feed, no visible engagement metrics, and no built-in mechanism for viral content diffusion, renders it categorically distinct from the open public-sphere platforms (X/Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) that anchor most research on social media and political participation. If a substantial portion of Japanese youth's digital social life occurs within a platform that structurally suppresses exposure to political content, partisan framing, and polarized discourse, the dominant causal mechanisms posited in the Western literature may operate differently or not at all.

This study introduces the concept of 'digital minimalism' as an analytical construct to describe this configuration: a pattern of online behavior characterized by below-average engagement with public-facing social media platforms and a preference for closed, interpersonal digital communication. It is important to distinguish this usage from the normative self-help framing popularized by Newport (2019), who advocates deliberate reduction of technology use for personal well-being. In the present context, digital minimalism is employed descriptively and structurally, referring to an observable pattern of platform selection and time allocation rather than a self-conscious lifestyle philosophy.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses three interrelated research questions. First, do different patterns of social media platform use, specifically, Line-dominant, X-dominant, and multi-platform, correlate with measurable differences in civic participation outcomes among Japanese youth? Second, does exposure to politically polarized content, as a mediating variable, partially account for any observed differences in civic engagement across platform-use groups? Third, what is the relationship between aggregate daily online time and electoral participation when controlling for platform type, political interest, and demographic covariates?

The study contributes to the literature in two principal ways. Empirically, it provides the first large-scale cross-platform survey ( $n = 1,500$ ) specifically designed to compare civic engagement profiles across Line-dominant and open-platform-dominant youth in Japan. Theoretically, it challenges the implicit universalism of existing models of social media and civic participation by demonstrating that the civic consequences of digital media use are conditioned by platform architecture, which shapes not only what information users encounter but also the emotional and relational register in which digital communication occurs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1 Social Media and Civic Engagement: A Conditional Relationship*

The proposition that social media enhances civic engagement has been subjected to extensive empirical scrutiny, with results that defy simple generalization. Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis of 36 studies found a positive but modest average association between social media use and civic and political participation, with the relationship modulated by the type of participation measured, the platform examined, and the national context. Subsequent work has further qualified this finding. Schäfer (2015) demonstrated that the positive relationship between online political discussion and participation is conditional on the quality of deliberation, with exposure to cross-cutting perspectives producing stronger mobilization effects than exposure to like-minded views. Schlozman et al. (2018) found that the participatory benefits of social media are unequally distributed, with highly educated, politically engaged citizens reaping the greatest gains, raising concerns about digital amplification of existing participatory inequalities.

A second line of inquiry focuses on the negative effects of algorithmically curated information environments. Settle's (2018) analysis of Facebook use among American adults documents how social media exposure to politically charged content generates emotional arousal, partisan identity salience, and ultimately a form of 'partisan sorting'

that reduces openness to cross-partisan dialogue. Bail et al.'s (2018) experimental study found that exposure to opposing political views on Twitter, far from fostering tolerance, actually increased partisan polarization among Republicans. These findings suggest that the relationship between social media engagement and civic health depends critically on the information architecture of the platforms in question, a point of direct relevance for comparing Line's closed architecture with X's open, algorithmically amplified public sphere.

## ***2.2 Youth Political Participation in Japan: Structural Constraints***

Japanese youth political participation has been a subject of sustained concern among political scientists and policymakers. Japan's voting turnout among 18–29 year olds was approximately 33.4% in the 2021 House of Representatives election, well below the overall turnout of 55.9% (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan, 2022). This participation deficit is not unique to Japan, comparable youth disengagement is observable across OECD democracies, but it is exacerbated in Japan by several structural features: a highly consensus-oriented political culture that reduces the salience of partisan competition; a dominance of long-established parties (particularly the Liberal Democratic Party) that limits perceived electoral efficacy among young voters; and an educational system that has historically deprioritized political literacy and civic education (Pekkanen & Reed, 2018; Ichijo, 2020).

The introduction of voting age reduction from 20 to 18 in 2016 prompted a wave of research on Japanese youth civic engagement. Studies conducted in this period consistently find that while young Japanese citizens express civic values and community-oriented behaviors, they display lower levels of partisan political interest and electoral participation compared to their counterparts in other OECD nations (Mikami, 2019; Tanaka & Feldman, 2021). Importantly for the present study, this literature also identifies a distinction between 'community-oriented' civic participation (volunteering, local activism, neighborhood association involvement) and 'partisan' political participation (voting, campaign involvement, online political advocacy), with Japanese youth displaying relatively stronger inclinations toward the former (Mikami, 2019).

## ***2.3 Line and the Architecture of Closed Communication***

Line's dominance in the Japanese digital communication landscape reflects both network effects and platform-specific design choices that resonate with cultural norms around privacy, interpersonal harmony, and the avoidance of public confrontation (Nakamura, 2020). Unlike X or Facebook, Line's core functionality centers on private message threads and small-group chats; its 'Timeline' feature, which approximates a

public feed, is used by a small minority of active users and generates minimal engagement compared to the messaging function. This architecture has well-documented consequences for information exposure: Line users are substantially less likely than X or Facebook users to encounter unsolicited political content, breaking news, or partisan commentary (Kobayashi & Inamasu, 2015).

Kobayashi and Inamasu (2015) conducted one of the few comparative studies of social media platform use and political knowledge in Japan, finding that incidental news exposure, encountering political information while using a platform for non-political purposes, was significantly lower among Line users than among Twitter or Facebook users. This 'incidental exposure' mechanism has been identified as a key pathway through which social media use promotes political awareness among otherwise disengaged citizens (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Its relative absence in Line-dominant digital environments thus constitutes a plausible mechanism through which platform architecture shapes civic outcomes, and one that the present study seeks to test empirically.

#### ***2.4 Digital Minimalism: Conceptual Framing***

The term 'digital minimalism' entered popular discourse primarily through Newport's (2019) self-help manifesto advocating deliberate, values-driven reduction in technology use. In the academic literature, it has been operationalized in a small number of studies on technoference, digital detox, and problematic social media use (Schmuck, 2020; Throuvala et al., 2020). The present study adopts a structurally oriented definition: digital minimalism here designates an observable pattern of platform use characterized by low aggregate online time and a concentration of digital social interaction within closed, low-stimulation environments (in Japan's case, primarily Line). This framing aligns with Duke and Montag's (2017) work on smartphone use subtypes, which distinguishes between 'habitual' use of closed communication apps and 'stimulation-seeking' use of open social feed platforms, a distinction with demonstrated implications for psychological well-being and information-seeking behavior.

The key theoretical claim advanced in this article is that digital minimalism, as defined above, is not simply an absence of online political engagement but constitutes a distinct mode of digital sociality with its own civic correlates. The closed, relational architecture of Line may foster different forms of social capital, particularly the bonding social capital associated with dense, high-trust interpersonal networks, compared to the bridging social capital more typically associated with open platform use (Putnam, 2000; Ellison et al., 2007). These different forms of social capital, in turn, may map onto

different participation profiles: community-based civic engagement rather than partisan electoral activism.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1 Research Design and Sample

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design. Data were collected between October and December 2024 across six Japanese prefectures (Tokyo, Osaka, Aichi, Fukuoka, Miyagi, and Hokkaido), selected to represent variation in urban density, regional culture, and economic development. Participants were recruited through a combination of university research networks and a panel service (Macromill, Inc.), using stratified quota sampling to ensure approximately equal representation by age group (18–25; 26–35) and gender. The final analytical sample comprised 1,500 respondents (M age = 26.4 years, SD = 4.9; 51.3% female, 47.6% male, 1.1% other/prefer not to say). All participants provided informed consent, and the protocol received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Graduate School of Information Science and Technology, University of Tokyo (IRB Approval No. IST-2024-087).

#### 3.2 Platform-Use Classification

Participants were classified into three mutually exclusive platform-use groups based on their responses to items assessing which platform they used most frequently for social communication and which they relied upon most heavily as a source of news and public information. Line-dominant users ( $n = 712$ , 47.5%) were those who reported using Line as their primary communication platform and who did not identify any open public-discourse platform (X, Facebook, YouTube news channels, or news aggregators) as a primary news source. X/Twitter-dominant users ( $n = 388$ , 25.9%) reported X as either their primary communication platform or their primary news source. Multi-platform users ( $n = 400$ , 26.7%) reported substantial active use of two or more platforms across both communication and news functions. Daily online time was measured through self-report and validated against platform-use frequency items using established procedures (Ernala et al., 2020).

#### 3.3 Measures

**Civic Participation Index (CPI):** A composite seven-item scale assessing frequency of electoral participation (voting in national and local elections), participation in local civic organizations, attendance at community meetings, petition signing, contacting elected representatives, and participating in demonstrations. Items were

scored on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = never to 5 = always or for every opportunity) and averaged; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ .

**News Consumption Index (NCI):** A five-item composite measuring frequency and diversity of news consumption across television, print/online newspapers, social media news, podcasts, and word-of-mouth. Items were averaged;  $\alpha = .78$ . A total of 40.7% of respondents identified social media (primarily X/Twitter or Facebook) as their primary news source, consistent with DataReportal (2024) figures for Japan.

**Polarization Exposure Score (PES):** A four-item scale assessing self-reported frequency of encountering content perceived as politically extreme, emotionally inflammatory, or promoting hostile intergroup framing on social media platforms. Items were adapted from Settle (2018);  $\alpha = .76$ .

**Political Interest Score:** A single validated item ('How interested are you in politics and public affairs?') rated on a 5-point scale, which has demonstrated adequate validity and reliability in comparative political research (Verba et al., 1995).

Voting participation was operationalized as a binary outcome (voted in the most recent national election: yes/no) for logistic regression analyses. Community volunteering participation was similarly operationalized as a binary measure (participated in at least one formal community volunteering activity in the preceding 12 months).

### ***3.4 Analytical Strategy***

Group differences on continuous measures were assessed using one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests. Binary outcomes were analyzed using binary logistic regression with block entry of predictors: Block 1 included demographic covariates (age, gender, educational attainment, prefectural urban density); Block 2 added platform-use group classification and daily online time; Block 3 added NCI, PES, and Political Interest Score. Mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap iterations to assess whether polarization exposure mediated the relationship between platform-use group and voting participation. All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 28 and R 4.3.0.

## **4. RESULTS**

### ***4.1 Group Differences in Civic Engagement and Digital Behavior***

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics by platform-use group. One-way ANOVA revealed significant group differences on all five continuous measures. Line-dominant users reported significantly lower mean daily online time (178.4 minutes,  $SD = 52.1$ )

than both X-dominant users (261.7 minutes, SD = 74.3) and multi-platform users (249.6 minutes, SD = 69.8),  $F(2, 1497) = 187.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .20$ . This result places Line-dominant users substantially below Japan's national average of approximately 225 minutes and considerably below the OECD average.

Variable	Line-dominant (n=712)	X/Twitter-dominant (n=388)	Multi-platform (n=400)	p-value
Mean daily online time (min)	178.4 (SD=52.1)	261.7 (SD=74.3)	249.6 (SD=69.8)	< .001
Civic Participation Index (CPI)	3.41 (SD=0.88)	3.19 (SD=0.96)	3.28 (SD=0.91)	.023
News Consumption Index (NCI)	2.87 (SD=0.74)	3.56 (SD=0.82)	3.44 (SD=0.79)	< .001
Political Interest Score	2.93 (SD=0.91)	3.38 (SD=1.02)	3.31 (SD=0.98)	< .001
Polarization Exposure Score	2.14 (SD=0.67)	3.47 (SD=0.93)	3.21 (SD=0.88)	< .001
Voted in last election (%)	41.3%	33.8%	38.2%	.041
Community volunteering (%)	28.7%	19.4%	23.1%	.003

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics by platform primary use group.**

On the Civic Participation Index, Line-dominant users scored significantly higher ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than X-dominant users ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $F(2, 1497) = 4.83$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $\eta^2 = .006$ , though the effect size was small. Post-hoc analysis confirmed that this difference was driven primarily by the Line versus X contrast ( $p = .019$ ), while the multi-platform group occupied an intermediate position that did not significantly differ from either group. Decomposing the CPI by participation type revealed that this pattern was driven predominantly by the community volunteering and local civic organization items; Line-dominant users did not score significantly higher than other groups on items assessing partisan political behaviors such as petition signing or contacting representatives.

Conversely, X-dominant users scored significantly higher on the News Consumption Index ( $M = 3.56$ ) and the Political Interest Score ( $M = 3.38$ ) compared to Line-dominant users (NCI:  $M = 2.87$ ; PIS:  $M = 2.93$ ), both  $p < .001$ . The Polarization Exposure Score showed the largest group difference: X-dominant users ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) scored substantially higher than Line-dominant users ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),

$F(2, 1497) = 289.11, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$ , a large effect indicating that exposure to politically polarized content is fundamentally structured by platform architecture.

Binary outcome measures reinforced this pattern. Electoral participation (voting in the most recent national election) was highest among Line-dominant users (41.3%), compared to X-dominant users (33.8%) and multi-platform users (38.2%),  $\chi^2(2) = 6.44, p = .041$ . Community volunteering participation was also highest among Line-dominant users (28.7%), compared to X-dominant users (19.4%),  $\chi^2(2) = 11.89, p = .003$ .

#### 4.2 Logistic Regression: Predictors of Voting Participation

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression predicting voting participation. The full model was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(8) = 87.34, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .214$ . Daily online time was a significant negative predictor of voting participation ( $B = -0.004, OR = 0.996, p < .01$ ), indicating that for each additional minute of daily online time, the odds of voting decreased by approximately 0.4%, a small but consistent effect that accumulated meaningfully across the range of the distribution. Line-dominant platform use significantly predicted higher voting probability relative to multi-platform use ( $OR = 1.46, 95\% CI [1.11, 1.93], p < .01$ ), while X-dominant use did not significantly differ from multi-platform use after controlling for other predictors.

Predictor	B	SE	Wald $\chi^2$	OR (95% CI)
Daily online time (continuous)	-0.004	0.001	12.44**	0.996 [0.994, 0.998]
Line-dominant use (ref: multi-platform)	0.381	0.142	7.19**	1.46 [1.11, 1.93]
X/Twitter-dominant use (ref: multi-platform)	-0.214	0.158	1.83	0.81 [0.59, 1.10]
News Consumption Index	0.298	0.081	13.51***	1.35 [1.15, 1.57]
Polarization Exposure Score	-0.187	0.074	6.39*	0.83 [0.72, 0.96]
Political Interest Score	0.512	0.088	33.89***	1.67 [1.41, 1.99]
Age (years)	0.047	0.021	5.01*	1.05 [1.01, 1.09]
Gender (female = 1)	0.089	0.118	0.57	1.09 [0.87, 1.38]

Note. \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .214$ . Model  $\chi^2(8) = 87.34, p < .001$ .

**Table 2. Binary logistic regression predicting voting participation.**

Political Interest Score was the strongest predictor of voting (OR = 1.67,  $p < .001$ ), followed by News Consumption Index (OR = 1.35,  $p < .001$ ). The Polarization Exposure Score was a significant negative predictor (OR = 0.83, 95% CI [0.72, 0.96],  $p < .05$ ), indicating that higher exposure to polarized content was associated with lower odds of voting, a finding with important implications discussed in Section 5. Age was a positive predictor (OR = 1.05,  $p < .05$ ), while gender was not significant after controlling for other variables.

#### **4.3 Mediation Analysis: Polarization Exposure as Mediator**

Bootstrap mediation analysis examined whether the negative effect of X-dominant platform use on voting participation (relative to Line-dominant use) was partially mediated by Polarization Exposure Score. The indirect effect of X-dominant use on voting via polarization exposure was significant (indirect effect =  $-0.094$ , 95% bootstrap CI [ $-0.162$ ,  $-0.031$ ]), accounting for approximately 31% of the total effect. The direct effect of X-dominant platform use remained non-significant in the mediation model (direct effect =  $-0.189$ , 95% CI [ $-0.421$ ,  $0.043$ ]), suggesting that polarization exposure represents a primary pathway through which X-dominant use is associated with lower voting participation. News consumption did not significantly mediate the platform-voting relationship, indicating that the effects of information access and polarization exposure operate independently.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The results of this study reveal a nuanced and, in some respects, counterintuitive picture of the relationship between digital media use and civic engagement in Japanese youth. Three principal findings warrant extended discussion.

First, Line-dominant users, those who are most consistent with the 'digital minimalism' pattern defined in this study, exhibit higher rates of electoral participation and community volunteering than their X-dominant counterparts, despite scoring lower on political interest and news consumption. This pattern is inconsistent with the straightforward information-mobilization model, which predicts that higher news consumption and political interest should translate into higher civic participation. The divergence suggests that the pathway from digital media use to civic participation in this context operates through a different mechanism: not political information and partisan mobilization, but social network density and local community embeddedness. Line's architecture, which prioritizes stable, high-trust interpersonal connections over viral public content, may foster the kind of bonding social capital that Putnam (2000)

and Ellison et al. (2007) identify as a foundation for community-oriented civic participation, even in the relative absence of political stimulation.

Second, the Polarization Exposure Score functions as both a discriminating variable between platform groups and a negative predictor of voting participation in the regression model. Line-dominant users score markedly lower on this measure ( $M = 2.14$ ) than X-dominant users ( $M = 3.47$ ), and higher polarization exposure is associated with lower odds of voting ( $OR = 0.83$ ). The mediation analysis confirms that approximately 31% of the voting gap between X-dominant and Line-dominant users is attributable to the polarization exposure pathway. This finding aligns with experimental and observational evidence from the United States suggesting that extreme partisan content on social media generates emotional alienation and political disengagement among portions of the electorate (Settle, 2018; Bail et al., 2018), but extends this finding to a non-Western context with a qualitatively different political culture. In Japan's consensus-oriented political system, where ideological polarization is comparatively low at the elite level (Pekkanen & Reed, 2018), exposure to imported or algorithmically amplified polarized content may be particularly dissonant and demobilizing.

Third, the negative association between daily online time and voting participation, while modest in magnitude ( $OR = 0.996$  per minute), is statistically robust and directionally consistent across model specifications. This finding contributes to a small but growing literature questioning the assumption that higher social media engagement promotes democratic participation (Schlozman et al., 2018). In the Japanese context, high daily online time is strongly correlated with X-dominant platform use and polarization exposure; the direct effect of online time on voting probability likely reflects this confounding structure partially. Nevertheless, the persistence of a significant online time coefficient after controlling for platform type suggests that time displacement, the substitution of digital media consumption for offline civic activities, may also play a role.

The present findings must be interpreted with several caveats. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the observed associations between platform use and civic participation could reflect selection effects, whereby individuals with different civic orientations self-select into different platform ecosystems. Longitudinal panel data would be necessary to disentangle platform effects from pre-existing civic dispositions. Additionally, the self-reported nature of both online time and civic participation measures carries the usual risk of social desirability bias, which may systematically inflate reported participation rates. The sample, though large, is limited to six prefectures and excludes rural populations, which may have distinct platform-use

patterns and civic engagement profiles. Finally, the operational definition of 'digital minimalism' as platform-use classification based on survey self-report is a necessary simplification of a complex behavioral pattern that ideally would be captured through objective log data.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that the relationship between digital media use and civic engagement in Japan is not simply a scaled-down version of the Western pattern but is qualitatively structured by Japan's distinctive platform ecology and political culture. The dominance of Line creates a digital public sphere, or more precisely, an aggregate of private spheres, that is structurally insulated from the polarizing dynamics of open public platforms. Within this environment, civic engagement takes forms that are less visible to conventional political science measures (electoral activism, partisan mobilization) but not less real: community participation, local volunteerism, and the sustenance of the dense interpersonal networks on which local civic life depends.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between digital minimalism, operationalized as Line-dominant, low-aggregate-time social media use, and civic engagement among Japanese youth aged 18–35. Drawing on a cross-platform survey of 1,500 respondents, the findings demonstrate that Line-dominant users exhibit higher rates of electoral and community participation than X-dominant users, despite lower political interest and news consumption, and that this gap is partially mediated by differential exposure to politically polarized content. Logistic regression identifies daily online time as a negative predictor of voting participation, while political interest and news consumption function as positive predictors across platform groups.

These results have implications for at least three audiences. For scholars of digital media and democracy, they highlight the necessity of disaggregating 'social media use' by platform architecture rather than treating it as a unidimensional construct. The civic consequences of digital communication depend fundamentally on whether that communication occurs in open, algorithmically curated public spheres or in closed, relationship-centered messaging environments, a distinction that is invisible in aggregate screen time data but fundamental to understanding how digital life shapes civic capacity. For scholars of Japanese politics, the findings invite a reframing of youth political disengagement: the picture that emerges is not one of a civically inert generation but of a generation whose civic life is concentrated in community-oriented rather than partisan

channels, structured in part by the architecture of the platforms that mediate their social world.

For policymakers and civic educators, the findings suggest caution in assuming that promoting increased social media engagement will straightforwardly increase youth political participation. In environments where open platforms are associated with elevated polarization exposure and lower voting probability, strategies that enhance the quality and accessibility of civic information within closed messaging environments, Line-based civic information campaigns, community event coordination through trusted interpersonal networks, may be more effective than approaches predicated on expanding access to algorithmically driven public discourse.

Future research should address the limitations of the present study through longitudinal designs capable of establishing causal direction, objective platform log data to supplement self-report, inclusion of rural and older youth populations, and cross-national comparative designs that situate Japan's digital minimalism pattern within the broader landscape of platform ecology and civic culture. Qualitative investigation of how young Japanese citizens understand and navigate the boundary between private messaging spaces and public civic discourse would further enrich understanding of the mechanisms identified here.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no competing interests.

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**Data availability:** The anonymized survey dataset is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approvals.

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