

Experts' Perspectives on the Role of Social Media in Shaping the Future of Political Participation in Iran: A Qualitative Futures Study

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the Introduction paragraph beginning with “The transition from industrial society to network society,” the manuscript presents network society as the principal macro-level framework for understanding digitally mediated politics. However, this framework is introduced descriptively and is not subsequently integrated into the analytical interpretation of the findings. The authors should explain which specific characteristics of network society—such as decentralization, many-to-many communication, networked power, reduced gatekeeping, or platform-mediated visibility—are analytically relevant to the study. The Discussion should then explicitly return to these concepts rather than treating the network-society perspective as background information only.

The paragraph stating that “social media refers not merely to a collection of technological platforms but to an evolving communicative ecosystem” requires greater conceptual specificity. The manuscript currently uses “social media,” “cyberspace,” “virtual space,” “social networks,” and “messaging applications” almost interchangeably, although these terms refer to different technological and communicative environments. The authors should clarify whether the study concerns public social networking platforms, messaging applications, microblogging services, video-sharing platforms, domestic platforms, international platforms, or all of these categories. This distinction is particularly important because the findings attribute different levels of trust, visibility, mobilization capacity, and political influence to different platform types.

The Introduction paragraph discussing the “distinction between symbolic expression and consequential political participation” identifies an important theoretical problem, but the manuscript does not establish an explicit analytical criterion for distinguishing the two. The authors should specify whether political participation was classified according to intentionality,

voluntariness, political target, level of effort, collective orientation, institutional consequence, or measurable influence. Without such criteria, statements in the Findings such as “abstract reactions may constitute a low level of participation” and “purely passive and abstract behavior does not constitute participation” appear conceptually inconsistent. A graded typology of political participation would resolve this ambiguity.

In the final part of the Introduction, the manuscript identifies a “substantial need” for a futures-oriented interpretation of social media and political participation in Iran. This research gap should be formulated more systematically. The authors should state what previous Iranian studies have examined, what methodological limitations characterize those studies, and what specifically remains unknown. For example, it should be clarified whether prior research has been predominantly quantitative, election-focused, youth-centered, cross-sectional, or limited to correlations between platform use and participation. The present study’s contribution would be more convincing if the gap were framed as a clearly defined absence of expert-based, future-oriented, context-sensitive qualitative analysis.

The manuscript reports that interviews were conducted “either face-to-face or through secure online communication platforms,” but it does not explain how differences between interview modes were managed. Face-to-face and online interviewing may produce different levels of rapport, disclosure, contextual detail, and perceived security, particularly when discussing politically sensitive topics. The authors should report how many interviews were conducted in each mode, which platforms were used, whether video was enabled, and whether mode-related differences were observed. They should also explain how privacy, recording security, data storage, and participant safety were protected.

In the Data Analysis section, the manuscript uses the term “interpretive thematic analysis,” but the analytic orientation remains unclear. The authors should indicate whether the analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach, codebook thematic analysis, framework analysis, interpretative phenomenological principles, or another established analytic tradition. The current description combines open coding, constant comparison, higher-order categorization, and futures-oriented interpretation, which may imply a hybrid design. The authors should clearly describe the epistemological position, coding logic, role of theory, and relationship between inductive and deductive analysis.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the Study Design and Participants section, the sentence “This study employed an applied qualitative research design with a futures-oriented approach” requires methodological clarification. “Futures-oriented approach” is currently used as a general label rather than a clearly operationalized research strategy. The authors should specify whether the study followed qualitative Delphi, exploratory futures research, horizon scanning, trend analysis, causal layered analysis, scenario-oriented inquiry, or another recognized futures methodology. If the study is described as Delphi-informed rather than a formal Delphi study, the methodological differences between the implemented procedure and a conventional Delphi process should be explicitly explained.

The Methods section states that “a Delphi-informed expert inquiry was incorporated into the research process,” but the procedures described do not clearly demonstrate a complete Delphi design. A Delphi study typically involves repeated rounds, structured feedback, controlled anonymity, reconsideration of judgments, and some explicit procedure for identifying convergence, stability, or disagreement. The manuscript should report the exact number of rounds conducted, the number of experts participating in each round, the form of feedback provided, the criteria used to retain or remove items, and whether consensus was sought. If only interviews and limited member feedback were conducted, the terminology should be revised to avoid overstating methodological adherence to Delphi.

In the participant description, the manuscript states that “the initial sampling framework included 30 recognized experts, although the adequacy of the final sample was determined by theoretical and informational saturation.” The final number of participants must be reported unambiguously. It is currently unclear whether all 30 experts were interviewed, whether fewer participants were included because saturation was reached earlier, or whether 30 represents only an intended sample. The

manuscript should also report relevant participant characteristics, such as disciplinary field, academic or professional role, years of experience, type of expertise, gender distribution, and involvement with domestic or international social media platforms, while preserving anonymity.

The eligibility criteria in the Study Design and Participants section are overly broad. The requirement that participants have “active familiarity with at least one social media platform or online messaging service” does not, by itself, establish expert status. The authors should define minimum expertise thresholds, such as a specified number of years of professional experience, publication record, academic rank, policymaking role, organizational position, or documented involvement in political communication and digital media. The procedure used to verify expert eligibility should also be reported. Greater specificity is needed to support the credibility and information richness of the sample.

The Data Collection Tools section states that the interview guide addressed a very large number of domains, including political awareness, mobilization, regulation, misinformation, surveillance, elite formation, political trust, and artificial intelligence. The breadth of the guide raises concerns about whether each topic could be explored in adequate depth during interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes. The authors should provide the number of principal questions and probes, explain how the interview guide was sequenced, and clarify whether all participants answered all questions. The full interview guide should preferably be included as a supplementary file so that readers can assess the alignment between the research aim, interview questions, and reported themes.

The sentence “A small number of preliminary interviews were also conducted” is methodologically insufficient. The manuscript should report the exact number of pilot interviews, the characteristics of pilot participants, whether their data were included in the final analysis, and the specific changes made to the interview guide. Statements that “several questions were refined” should be replaced with concrete information, such as whether wording was simplified, sensitive questions were reordered, duplicate questions were removed, or new probes were added. This information is necessary for evaluating the content validity and practical adequacy of the data collection instrument.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.