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## Youth Political Engagement in Bangladesh: Social Media Activism or Symbolic Participation?

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evolving nature of youth political participation in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on the growing role of social media platforms as spaces for political expression, discussion, and mobilization. In a political environment where formal institutions are frequently dominated by entrenched elites and youth participation remains limited, digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X have emerged as alternative arenas of engagement. Drawing on survey data from 300 university students in Dhaka, the study investigates whether online political engagement constitutes meaningful activism or remains largely symbolic, commonly described in the literature as clicktivism. The findings suggest that while Bangladeshi youth are highly active in digital political expression, this engagement rarely translates into sustained offline civic or political participation. Perceived political efficacy and trust in online information significantly encourage online engagement, whereas concerns related to privacy, surveillance, and political repression act as major deterrents to deeper involvement. Overall, the study highlights the emergence of a hybrid form of youth citizenship that is digitally expressive but institutionally constrained.

**Keywords:** Youth political participation; digital activism; political efficacy; privacy concern; social media engagement; Bangladesh

### 1. Introduction

Youth activism has historically played a central role in shaping Bangladesh's political trajectory. From the Language Movement of 1952 to the Liberation War of 1971 and subsequent struggles against authoritarian rule, young citizens have consistently emerged as key agents of political transformation. These movements not only challenged dominant power structures but also laid the foundation for democratic aspirations and national

identity formation. However, the modes and conditions of youth political participation have undergone significant changes in recent years.

Today, Bangladesh is experiencing a demographic reality in which nearly sixty percent of the population is under the age of thirty-five. At the same time, expanded access to smartphones, declining data costs, and widespread internet connectivity have profoundly reshaped political communication.

Traditional sites of political engagement—such as streets, campuses, and public assemblies—are increasingly supplemented or replaced by digital spaces. Social media platforms now function as primary venues where young people encounter political information, express opinions, and construct political identities.

This digital shift has generated an important scholarly debate. Optimistic perspectives argue that social media democratizes political participation by lowering barriers to entry, amplifying marginalized voices, and facilitating rapid mobilization. Digital platforms allow young citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers, question authority, and engage with public issues in ways that were previously inaccessible. In politically restrictive environments like Bangladesh, online spaces can serve as critical alternatives to controlled mainstream media and closed political institutions.

Critical scholars, however, caution against overstating the emancipatory potential of digital activism. They argue that online participation often remains superficial, emphasizing symbolic actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting rather than sustained collective action. This phenomenon—often labeled slacktivism or clicktivism—may provide emotional satisfaction or social visibility without generating tangible political change. In such cases, digital participation risks becoming an outlet for frustration rather than a pathway to democratic accountability.

The Bangladeshi context adds further complexity to this debate. Increasing state surveillance, restrictive cyber laws, and political polarization have fostered widespread anxiety among young users regarding online expression. Fear of legal consequences, harassment, or institutional retaliation can suppress both digital and offline participation, encouraging cautious and indirect forms of engagement. As a result, youth political participation appears increasingly hybrid: visibly active online yet

restrained in translating that engagement into real-world action.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to assess whether social media engagement among Bangladeshi youth represents meaningful political participation or largely symbolic involvement. By analyzing the relationships between online political activity, perceived political efficacy, trust in digital information, privacy concerns, and offline engagement, the study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates on digital citizenship and youth politics in developing democracies.

## 2. Literature Review

The expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed patterns of political participation across the globe. An extensive body of scholarship now examines how social media platforms influence civic engagement, political expression, and collective action, particularly among younger generations. This literature is broadly divided between optimistic perspectives that emphasize empowerment and inclusion, and critical approaches that highlight surveillance, commodification, and symbolic participation.

Proponents of digital activism argue that social media lower structural barriers to political participation by enabling citizens to access information, express dissent, and mobilize networks at minimal cost. Castells (2012) conceptualizes digital networks as ‘spaces of autonomy,’ where individuals can circumvent state and media gatekeepers to construct alternative political narratives. Similarly, Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2014) suggest that social media foster expressive and personalized forms of participation that resonate strongly with young citizens, allowing them to engage politically outside formal institutional settings.

Empirical studies from Western democracies support this optimistic view. Boulianne (2015), in a meta-analysis of digital participation, finds a positive association

between social media use and political engagement, particularly in terms of information sharing and civic discussion. Bennett (2012) also argues that personalized political communication on social media has redefined youth participation by shifting it from organization-based activism toward issue-oriented, networked engagement.

In contrast, critical scholars caution that online participation often lacks depth and sustainability. Morozov (2014) warns against technological solutionism, arguing that digital platforms frequently give the illusion of participation without generating real political power. The concept of 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' highlights how activities such as liking, sharing, or hashtagging may remain symbolic rather than transformative (Papacharissi, 2010). Tufekci (2017) further suggests that digitally organized movements often struggle to achieve long-term goals due to weak organizational structures and vulnerability to repression or co-optation.

Another major strand of the literature emphasizes the political economy of digital platforms. Zuboff's (2019) theory of surveillance capitalism argues that social media companies commodify user data, shaping political behavior through algorithmic visibility and content prioritization. These dynamics privilege emotional and sensational content, often undermining deliberative democratic discourse. In such environments, participation may serve corporate and state interests rather than challenging existing power structures.

Surveillance and state control are particularly salient in non-Western and hybrid regimes. Scholars note that governments increasingly use digital technologies to monitor dissent, regulate political narratives, and deter opposition activity (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Fear of surveillance, legal punishment, and online harassment can significantly suppress political expression, especially among young users. As a result, digital participation may

become cautious, indirect, and strategically symbolic rather than openly confrontational.

The literature on youth political participation consistently underscores the importance of political efficacy. Classical formulations by Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) identify efficacy—the belief that one can understand and influence politics—as a key predictor of participation. Later studies confirm that individuals with higher internal political efficacy are more likely to engage in political discussion, mobilization, and protest, both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). However, when external efficacy—trust in institutions and responsiveness of government—is low, participation may retreat into expressive or symbolic forms.

Trust in media and information sources is another crucial dimension. Studies show that confidence in the credibility of online political information increases the likelihood of engagement, sharing, and discussion (Ekström & Shehata, 2018). Conversely, environments characterized by misinformation and polarization may discourage meaningful participation, reinforcing cynicism and disengagement. Thus, digital media function simultaneously as tools of empowerment and sites of manipulation.

Regional research from South Asia reflects many of these global dynamics. Digital platforms have played visible roles in mobilizations such as India's anti-corruption movement, Pakistan's student protests, and Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya movement. Yet scholars note that while social media can rapidly generate mass attention and emotional solidarity, sustaining collective action remains difficult in the absence of institutional support and political openness (Mazzarella, 2013; Tufekci, 2017).

Overall, the literature suggests that digital activism occupies an ambiguous position within contemporary politics. While it expands opportunities for expression and visibility, it does not automatically lead to substantive participation or institutional

change. The gap between online activity and offline engagement remains a central concern, particularly in politically constrained environments. This study builds on these theoretical and empirical debates by examining how Bangladeshi youth navigate the opportunities and limitations of social media-based political participation.

### 3. Youth Political Participation in Bangladesh and Research Gap

Research on youth political participation in Bangladesh highlights a complex interaction between historical activism, contemporary digital practices, and structural political constraints. While young citizens have traditionally played decisive roles in major political movements, contemporary participation increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated environments shaped by legal, institutional, and cultural limitations.

Several studies identify social media—particularly Facebook—as the dominant platform for political communication among Bangladeshi youth. Al-Zaman (2020) notes that Facebook functions not only as a news source but also as an alternative public sphere where young users debate national issues, criticize political elites, and circulate movement-related narratives. In comparison to mainstream media, which is often perceived as politically constrained, social media offers relatively greater immediacy and accessibility for youth-driven political discourse.

Empirical research indicates that online political participation among Bangladeshi students is largely expressive rather than organizational. Rahman and Hassan (2021) find that university students primarily use social media for sharing opinions, commenting on political events, and constructing political identity, rather than for coordinated mobilization or sustained civic engagement. Islam (2019) similarly observes that increased political awareness through social media does not necessarily translate

into voter turnout, party activism, or involvement in civic organizations.

Studies examining major youth-led movements illustrate both the potential and limitations of digital activism in Bangladesh. The 2013 Shahbag Movement and the 2018 Road Safety Movement demonstrated how social media could rapidly mobilize public sentiment, coordinate protests, and challenge official narratives. However, subsequent analyses reveal that these mobilizations struggled to sustain momentum and achieve long-term institutional change, particularly in the face of political repression and intra-movement fragmentation.

A growing body of literature emphasizes the constraining role of surveillance and cyber regulation in shaping youth political behavior. The introduction of the Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018, and later the Cyber Security Act, has significantly altered the digital landscape. Karim (2022) argues that these laws have produced widespread surveillance anxiety, encouraging self-censorship and discouraging overt political expression. Young users often adapt by engaging in coded speech, satire, or private group communication to reduce perceived risks.

Privacy concerns and fear of legal repercussions disproportionately affect youth participation, particularly among students and first-time activists. Islam (2020) suggests that the perceived costs of political expression outweigh potential benefits in Bangladesh's restrictive environment, pushing young people toward low-risk, symbolic forms of participation. This dynamic reinforces a pattern in which online engagement substitutes for offline activism rather than serving as a gateway to it.

Other scholars draw attention to structural inequalities that shape digital participation. Ahmed (2021) highlights the persistent digital divide between urban and rural youth, as well as gendered patterns of online harassment that disproportionately silence young women. Although smartphone access has expanded

significantly, disparities in digital literacy, socioeconomic status, and social protection continue to affect who can participate confidently in online political spaces.

Despite these contributions, existing research on digital political participation in Bangladesh exhibits several important gaps. First, many studies focus exclusively on descriptive patterns of online behavior without systematically examining the psychological mechanisms—such as political efficacy and trust in digital information—that motivate participation. Second, few studies empirically analyze the relationship between online engagement and offline civic or political action using multivariate techniques. Third, privacy concern and surveillance anxiety are often discussed qualitatively but remain under-theorized and under-measured in quantitative research.

Moreover, much of the existing literature treats Bangladeshi youth as a homogeneous category, offering limited insight into how individual-level perceptions interact with broader structural constraints. There is also a lack of integrative frameworks that connect digital citizenship, political efficacy, and surveillance dynamics within a single empirical model.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a quantitative approach to examine how online political participation among Bangladeshi university students is shaped by political efficacy, trust in online information, and privacy concerns, and whether such engagement translates into offline participation. By integrating psychological, technological, and structural dimensions, the study contributes a more comprehensive understanding of youth political engagement in digitally constrained democratic contexts.

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: To what extent does online political participation translate into offline political engagement among Bangladeshi youth?

H1: Political efficacy positively predicts online political participation.

H2: Trust in online political information positively predicts online political participation.

H3: Privacy concern negatively predicts both online and offline political participation.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Political Efficacy Theory, Digital Participation Theory, and the concept of surveillance and privacy concern in digital environments. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding youth political participation in Bangladesh in the age of social media.

### 4.1 Political Efficacy Theory

Political efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their capacity to understand political processes and influence political outcomes. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) conceptualize political efficacy as consisting of internal efficacy, which reflects confidence in one's own political competence, and external efficacy, which concerns perceptions of governmental responsiveness to citizen demands. A large body of research demonstrates that political efficacy is a key predictor of political participation, including voting, protest, and civic engagement.

In digital contexts, political efficacy plays a particularly important role in motivating online political expression. Social media platforms provide relatively low-cost and accessible spaces for political discussion, allowing youths with higher internal efficacy to express opinions, share political content, and engage in debate. In contexts where traditional political institutions are perceived as unresponsive or exclusionary, politically efficacious individuals may gravitate toward online participation as an alternative form of engagement.

### 4.2 Digital Participation and Online Political Engagement

Digital participation theory emphasizes how digital technologies reshape patterns of civic and political engagement by lowering barriers

to participation and enabling new forms of expressive politics. Social media platforms allow users to access political information, connect with like-minded individuals, and participate in issue-based discussions outside formal organizational structures. For young citizens, these platforms function as alternative public spheres where political identities are formed and political opinions are articulated.

In Bangladesh, where mainstream media and formal political arenas are often perceived as restricted, social media has become a central space for youth political engagement. Online political participation-such as sharing political content, commenting on current issues, and following political actors-represents an important dimension of contemporary youth citizenship. However, digital participation does not necessarily translate into offline activism, particularly in politically constrained environments.

#### **4.3 Privacy Concern, Surveillance, and Self-Censorship**

The growing role of surveillance and privacy concern in digital environments introduces important constraints on political participation. Awareness of digital monitoring by both state authorities and platform providers can generate surveillance anxiety, leading individuals to limit their political expression. In restrictive political contexts, fear of legal consequences, harassment, or social repercussions may encourage self-censorship and discourage visible forms of participation.

For Bangladeshi youth, privacy concern plays a critical role in shaping political behavior. While social media offers opportunities for expression, perceptions of surveillance and data misuse can suppress both online and offline engagement. As a result, many young people engage in low-risk, symbolic forms of participation rather than sustained or collective political action.

#### **4.4 Integrating the Framework**

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives conceptualize youth political participation in Bangladesh as a form of hybrid engagement. Political efficacy motivates participation, digital platforms provide the space for expression, and privacy concern shapes the extent and visibility of engagement. This integrated framework guides the empirical analysis by linking psychological motivations, digital participation practices, and structural constraints to patterns of online and offline political behavior.

### **5. Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between online political participation and offline civic engagement among Bangladeshi youth. Quantitative methods are particularly suitable for identifying patterns, testing theoretical relationships, and estimating the relative influence of psychological and technological factors on political behavior.

#### **5.1 Research Design**

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data at a single point in time. This approach is widely used in political communication research to analyze attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral tendencies across populations. Given the study's focus on political efficacy, trust, privacy concern, and participation, a structured survey allowed for standardized measurement and statistical analysis of key variables.

#### **5.2 Study Site and Population**

The study was conducted in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, which hosts a dense concentration of higher education institutions and diverse student populations. The target population consisted of undergraduate students aged between 18 and 25 years enrolled in public, private, and semi-public universities. University students were selected due to their high levels of internet use and active engagement with political content on social media platforms.

#### **5.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

A non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and convenience sampling techniques was used. Participants were selected based on their regular use of social media and basic familiarity with political issues. Survey links were distributed through university-based online groups, departmental mailing lists, and student networks. A total of 300 complete and valid responses were collected, providing sufficient statistical power for correlational and regression analyses.

#### 5.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire consisting of five sections. Online political participation was measured through items capturing the frequency of liking, sharing, commenting on political content, using political hashtags, and following political actors on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X.

Offline participation was measured through indicators including attendance at rallies, involvement in student or civic organizations, volunteering, and participation in community or political activities. Political efficacy was assessed using adapted items from Campbell et al. (1954), focusing primarily on internal efficacy.

Trust in online political information was measured by items capturing respondents' perceived credibility of political news and content shared on social media. Privacy concern was measured through indicators of surveillance anxiety, fear of data misuse, and self-censorship. Demographic variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and university type were also included.

#### 5.5 Measurement and Scaling

All attitudinal and behavioral items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicated greater levels of participation, efficacy, trust, or concern. Scale construction followed

established practices in political behavior research.

#### 5.6 Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two faculty members specializing in political communication and survey research. A pilot survey involving 30 students was conducted to identify ambiguities and refine item wording. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha indicated satisfactory internal consistency for all scales, with coefficients exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70.

#### 5.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Data were coded and analyzed using standard quantitative analytical procedures. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and participation patterns. Pearson correlation analysis examined relationships between key variables, while hierarchical multiple regression models were employed to identify predictors of online and offline political participation, controlling for demographic factors.

#### 5.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards for social science research were strictly followed. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Given the sensitive political context, respondents were assured that data would be used solely for academic purposes.

### 6. Results and Analysis

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on survey data collected from 300 undergraduate students in Dhaka. The results are organized into three subsections: descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. Together, these findings illustrate patterns of youth political participation and identify key psychological and technological predictors of engagement.

#### 6.1 Descriptive Statistics

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 300)**

Variables	Level	Interpretation
Online Political Participation	High	Frequent digital engagement
Offline Political Participation	Low	Limited civic involvement
Political Efficacy	Moderate	Confidence in political understanding
Trust in Online Information	Moderate	Perceived credibility of content
Privacy Concern	High	Strong surveillance anxiety

Note: Levels are based on self-reported responses measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Descriptive analysis reveals a substantial disparity between online and offline political participation among Bangladeshi youth. A large majority of respondents (approximately 82 percent) reported frequent or very frequent engagement in online political activities, including discussing political issues, sharing political content, commenting on news, and following political actors on social media platforms.

In contrast, only around 27 percent of respondents reported regular involvement in offline political or civic activities such as attending rallies, participating in student organizations, volunteering, or engaging in community initiatives. This contrast highlights the growing dominance of digital platforms as primary spaces for political expression among youth.

Facebook emerged as the most frequently used platform for political content, followed by YouTube and TikTok. Respondents reported spending an average of three to four hours per day on social media, indicating sustained exposure to digital political information. Levels of perceived political efficacy were moderately high, while concerns related to privacy and surveillance

were widespread, with a majority expressing anxiety about potential monitoring or repercussions for political expression.

## 6.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between key variables. Political efficacy demonstrated a strong positive association with online political participation ( $r \approx 0.61, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students who believed in their ability to influence politics were more likely to engage actively in digital political expression.

Privacy concern showed a significant negative relationship with both online participation ( $r \approx -0.42, p < 0.001$ ) and offline participation ( $r \approx -0.36, p < 0.001$ ). These findings indicate that fear of surveillance, harassment, or legal consequences discourages political engagement across both digital and physical spaces.

Trust in online political information was moderately and positively correlated with online participation ( $r \approx 0.48, p < 0.001$ ), implying that confidence in the credibility of digital content encourages political sharing and discussion. Demographic variables such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status showed weak or insignificant associations with participation outcomes.

## 6.3 Regression Analysis

**Table 2. Regression Analysis Predicting Online Political Participation**

Predictor Variables	Effect Size ( $\beta$ )	Direction	Significance
Political Efficacy	0.39	Positive	Significant
Trust in Online Information	0.27	Positive	Significant
Privacy Concern	-0.25	Negative	Significant

Note: The model explains approximately 47% of the variance in online political participation ( $R^2 \approx 0.47$ ).

To identify the strongest predictors of political participation, multiple regression analysis was performed while controlling for demographic variables. The overall model was statistically significant and explained approximately 47 percent of the variance in political participation ( $R^2 \approx 0.47$ ), indicating substantial explanatory power.

Political efficacy emerged as the most influential predictor ( $\beta \approx 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming theoretical expectations that a sense of political competence motivates engagement. Trust in online information also had a significant positive effect ( $\beta \approx 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), reinforcing the central role of digital media as an information source for youth.

Privacy concern exerted a significant negative effect on participation ( $\beta \approx -0.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), demonstrating that surveillance anxiety and fear of repercussions substantially suppress political involvement. Gender and socioeconomic status did not display statistically significant effects, suggesting that psychological and contextual factors outweigh demographic characteristics in shaping youth political participation.

## 7. Discussion

This study provides empirical insight into the evolving nature of youth political participation in Bangladesh by examining the relationship between social media engagement, political efficacy, trust in online information, and privacy concerns. Rather than merely confirming the growth of digital political activity, the findings highlight the structural and psychological conditions under which such participation remains largely symbolic.

The strong association between political efficacy and online political participation supports existing research suggesting that individuals who feel politically competent are more likely to express opinions and engage in

political discussion in digital spaces. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing the role of internal political efficacy in motivating expressive forms of participation, particularly among youth. However, the limited translation of this engagement into offline participation indicates that efficacy alone is insufficient to generate sustained civic action in politically constrained environments.

In contrast to studies conducted in more open democratic contexts - where online participation often complements offline activism - this study reveals a divergence shaped by political context. While prior research suggests that digital engagement can act as a mobilizing gateway to offline participation, the Bangladeshi case demonstrates how restrictive political conditions weaken this linkage. This finding resonates with arguments that digitally networked participation is highly sensitive to institutional openness and political opportunity structures.

A key contribution of this study lies in explaining why political efficacy remains strong while offline participation remains weak. In Bangladesh, young people may possess the confidence to understand and discuss political issues, yet simultaneously perceive offline engagement as costly and risky. Widespread concerns about surveillance, legal repercussions, and political retaliation create a high-risk environment in which offline participation is perceived as dangerous, even for politically efficacious individuals. As a result, digital spaces become relatively safer arenas for expression, allowing youth to remain politically visible without incurring the risks associated with physical mobilization.

Trust in online political information further reinforces this dynamic. The positive relationship between trust and online engagement underscores the central role of social media as a political information source in a media environment often viewed as constrained. However, this reliance also raises

broader concerns about misinformation, emotional polarization, and algorithmic amplification, which may shape participation in expressive rather than deliberative ways. Thus, while trust facilitates engagement, it does not necessarily strengthen democratic accountability or institutional participation.

Importantly, the findings suggest that youth political engagement in Bangladesh is shaped less by demographic characteristics and more by perceptions of risk, efficacy, and institutional responsiveness. Expanded access to digital platforms has lowered expressive barriers, but it has not altered the structural constraints that limit meaningful participation. Digital activism therefore operates as both a form of political voice and a strategy of self-protection within a restrictive political environment.

Taken together, these findings challenge binary interpretations of digital activism as either empowering or ineffective. Instead, they point to a context-dependent form of political engagement in which symbolic participation represents a rational and adaptive response to political constraint. Understanding youth political participation in Bangladesh thus requires recognizing digital engagement not merely as a precursor to offline action, but as a distinct mode of citizenship shaped by risk, opportunity, and institutional limitation.

## 8. Conclusion

This study examined whether social media-based political engagement among Bangladeshi youth represents meaningful political participation or remains largely symbolic. Based on survey data from university students in Dhaka, the findings reveal a pronounced gap between high levels of online political expression and limited offline civic and political involvement. While digital platforms have become central arenas for political discussion, opinion sharing, and identity formation, such engagement rarely translates into sustained participation within formal political or civic institutions.

The analysis demonstrates that political efficacy is a key driver of online political participation, indicating that youth who feel politically competent are more likely to engage digitally. Trust in online political information further reinforces this engagement. However, widespread privacy concerns and fear of surveillance significantly constrain both online and offline participation, encouraging cautious, low-risk, and largely symbolic forms of engagement. These dynamics point to the emergence of a hybrid mode of youth political participation in Bangladesh - one that is digitally expressive but institutionally and structurally constrained.

**Theoretically**, the study contributes to the literature on digital citizenship by integrating political efficacy, trust in online information, and privacy concern within a single empirical framework, demonstrating how digital participation is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by perceived political risk in restrictive democratic contexts.

**From a policy perspective**, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening digital rights, reducing surveillance anxiety, and expanding safe institutional channels for youth participation. Without reforms that enhance political trust and protect freedom of expression, youth political engagement in Bangladesh is likely to remain expressive rather than transformative.

Overall, the study suggests that digital activism in politically constrained environments should be understood not simply as ineffective participation, but as an adaptive form of political engagement shaped by risk, opportunity, and institutional limitation.

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