




# Examining Social Media Usage Characteristics Among European Citizens and Its Influence on Civic Life: A Scoping Review

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## ABSTRACT

The popularity of social media has raised questions about the impact of these platforms on civic life. However, most research has focused on the United States, neglecting the cultural, political, and historical distinctions crucial for any understanding of civic life. In order to inform future research and provide relevant insights for policymakers and citizens, we conducted a scoping review of 59 records dealing with the relationship between European citizens' use of social media and their civic life. The findings revealed that 10 different spheres of civic life have been examined in the literature including migration, satisfaction with democracy, emergency management and European identity. The most often studied sphere was political participation, showing a positive association with social media use. However, the scoping review has also highlighted five factors that may nuance this relationship: citizens' characteristics (who), usage motivations (why), usage types (how), platform features (what) and usage context (when). Some of these factors transcended national boundaries, while others required careful consideration of the European context. The article concludes therefore by discussing avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** Europe, Citizen, Social Media, Twitter, Facebook.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has revolutionized the ways in which individuals engage with political and civic life. As platforms for communication, self-expression, and content creation, social media have facilitated new forms of political participation, enabling citizens to voice their opinions, mobilize for causes, and access diverse political information. While the potential of these platforms to foster civic engagement is promising, concerns have emerged regarding their impact on democratic processes, the quality of public discourse, and the rise of political polarization. Although substantial research has examined the relationship between social media use and civic life, much of this work has focused on the United States, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these platforms shape political participation in other contexts, particularly in Europe. The present scoping review addresses this gap by examining the use of social media by European citizens and its influence on civic life, with a focus on identifying the factors that can influence this relationship.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media have become highly popular in Europe: while the percentage of social media users stood at 36% in 2011, it has increased to 57% in 2020 (Eurostat, 2021). Social media platforms can be defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In other words, social media refers to digital platforms that enable individuals to create and share content in different formats, while facilitating interaction among users (Effing, van Hillegersberg, & Huibers, 2011). Social media include platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as other platforms such as blogs.

The rise of social media has led to concerns that these online platforms may undermine civic life, which refers to the involvement of citizens in political affairs and the democratic process (Mayhook, 2023). A well-known critique is that online political activism may be considered a form of slacktivism: "Online, low-effort political activities do not translate into more intense forms of off-line political activities" (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020, p. 114). Other criticisms that were raised include that social media would lead to filter bubbles and greater political polarization (Lorenz-Spreen, Oswald, Lewandowsky, & Hertwig, 2022).

Consequently, the impact of social media on civic life has received substantial attention in prior research, but predominantly with a focus on the United States (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). However, studies that focus on the European context remain relatively limited (Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, & Trenz, 2017). This is reflected by a meta-analysis on the impact of social media on citizen engagement (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016): out of 21 samples, most of them (16 samples) focused on the United States.

While the impact of social media on civic life is a transnational phenomenon, the differences between continents and countries should be taken into account (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). Social media regulations and policies implemented in one region can lead to different experiences for citizens in other regions (Ververis, Marguel, & Fabian, 2020). Furthermore, there are political, historical, and cultural differences between continents that can impact the relationship between social media use and citizen engagement. For example, whereas the United States has a two-party political system, most European countries have multiparty systems (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). Moreover, in recent years, Europe has faced a number of civic challenges, including the ongoing repercussions of the Brexit and the rise of populist movements in countries such as Italy and Hungary (González-González, Marcos-Marne, Llamazares, & de Zúñiga, 2022; Hameleers, Brosius, & de Vreese, 2022; Paolillo & Gerbaudo, 2022). The continent has also faced social issues such as the migration crisis, which has given rise to discussions on immigration policies and multiculturalism (Evolvi, 2019). Historical events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall continue to influence European perspectives, with many Eastern European countries undergoing political transformations, moving from communist or socialist systems to various forms of democracy (Placek, 2017).

The purpose of this scoping review is, therefore, to examine the literature on social media use by European citizens and its relationship with civic life. More specifically, the scoping review aims to answer two interrelated research questions<sup>1</sup>:

RQ1. What characterizes European citizens' use of social media in the context of civic life?

RQ2. How does social media use impact civic life in Europe and which factors influence this relationship?

In the next paragraphs, we will briefly present prior literature on the relationship between social media use and civic life. Most of these studies focused on political participation as an indicator of civic life and were conducted in a United States context.

Many studies have shown that social media can promote political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Jost et al., 2018; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Meta-analytic evidence confirms this positive association (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016). As such, these results challenge the presumed phenomenon of slacktivism as the positive effects are not limited to the online context (Boulianne, 2015; Greijdanus et al., 2020; Skoric et al., 2016). However, these findings do not necessarily imply that social media has an unambiguously positive impact on civic life for two key reasons. On the one hand, the relationship between social media use and political engagement is positive but small in size (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016). This may suggest that the relationship is complex and depends on a wide range of factors. On the other hand, Lorenz-Spreen and other researchers (2022) highlighted that while political participation is the leading indicator of civic life, other

<sup>1</sup> We slightly broadened the pre-registered research questions as the scoping review progressed and new insights emerged.

indicators should be taken into account, such as political information or political trust. These other indicators may be differentially impacted by social media use.

Prior research provided initial insights into factors that may affect the relationship between social media use and political participation. First, several studies revealed that social media effects are strongest when these platforms are specifically used to stay on top of the news (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Skoric et al., 2016). This implies that usage motivations matter. For example, citizens who use social media to interact with relatives may not experience the same positive effects on their civic life as compared to citizens who use social media to follow the news. Second, early evidence is available that usage types matter. Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu and Brundidge (2013) showed that using blogs actively for self-expression was positively associated with political participation, but this was not the case when citizens engaged in passive consumption of blog content. Third, the nature of the specific social media platform may also matter (Bossetta, 2018). Halpern, Valenzuela and Katz (2017) found that sharing political content on Twitter and Facebook was positively related to political participation by increasing peoples' perception of political efficacy. However, while Twitter was associated with more internal political efficacy, Facebook was associated with more collective political efficacy. Fourth, the impact of social media on civic life likely depends on citizens' characteristics including education, gender, and age (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Foster (2018) revealed that women's online activism strengthened the relationship between gender identity and women's well-being, demonstrating gender-specific dynamics. Finally, it should be noted that there may be other factors affecting the relationship between social media and political participation. Context features, such as the time of day or the nature of the political event, may also be relevant but have received comparatively less attention in prior research.

Aside from political participation, social media may also impact other indicators of civic life. For example, these platforms provide a vast amount of political information that is essential for citizens' understanding of civic issues, political candidates or policies. Some research has therefore examined the effect of the presence of misinformation on social media. The results are mixed with some studies revealing no effects while other studies confirmed the detrimental influence of social media misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Tucker et al., 2018). One of the reasons that misinformation may not always have negative effects lies in the fact that most citizens ignore fake news (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2020); however, if they do pay attention, they can be substantially impacted (Rocha et al., 2023). There are also indicators of civic life that are specifically related to the European context. For example, the concept of Euroscepticism is used to describe "scepticism about Europe or European integration" (Hooghe & Marks, 2007, p. 120). A growing body of research has shown that Euroscepticism has become mainstream in the media (Bijsmans, 2017). A closely related indicator is that of European identity, which refers to a sense of belonging to a common European community (McLaren, 2007). Whereas Euroscepticism is most often aligned with nationalist sentiments, European identity promotes a sense of unity beyond national borders. Understanding the impact of social media on these two concepts is therefore essential within the European context.

In sum, in contrast to public concerns, prior research does not suggest that social media always or even typically undermines civic life. However, studies on this topic in a European context are rare. The aim of the present study is to review and integrate prior literature on the relationship between European citizens' use of social media and their civic life. This study has theoretical implications as it will provide an overview of what we already know on this topic and identify knowledge gaps that should be addressed by future work. Moreover, the study has societal implications as it will provide key insights for policymakers and citizens who are interested in how social media could promote or impede support for the European project.

To achieve our research aim, we conducted a scoping review. This method is a type of literature review that "incorporates a range of study designs to comprehensively summarize and synthesize evidence with the aim of informing practice, programs, and policy and providing direction to future research priorities" (Colquhoun et al., 2014 p. 1291). A scoping review is particularly well suited for broad research questions with heterogeneous literature (Peters et al., 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

The research questions, research strategy, data extraction and data analysis were pre-registered (i.e., deposited online before conducting the scoping review). The pre-registration is available at this link: [https://aspredicted.org/D4R\\_LZB](https://aspredicted.org/D4R_LZB).

## Search Strategy

Regarding our eligibility criteria, we decided to be as inclusive as possible to have a holistic view of the literature. The inclusion criteria were: records in English (published or unpublished), with no time period restrictions, that used any methodology to address social media use by European citizens and its relationship with civic life. In so doing, records that addressed Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) but without an emphasis on social media, or that focused on collective actors rather than ordinary citizens were not considered. Regarding exclusion criteria, records were excluded if they focused on social media news coverage of Europe or on the way political parties, journalists, and European institutions use social media.

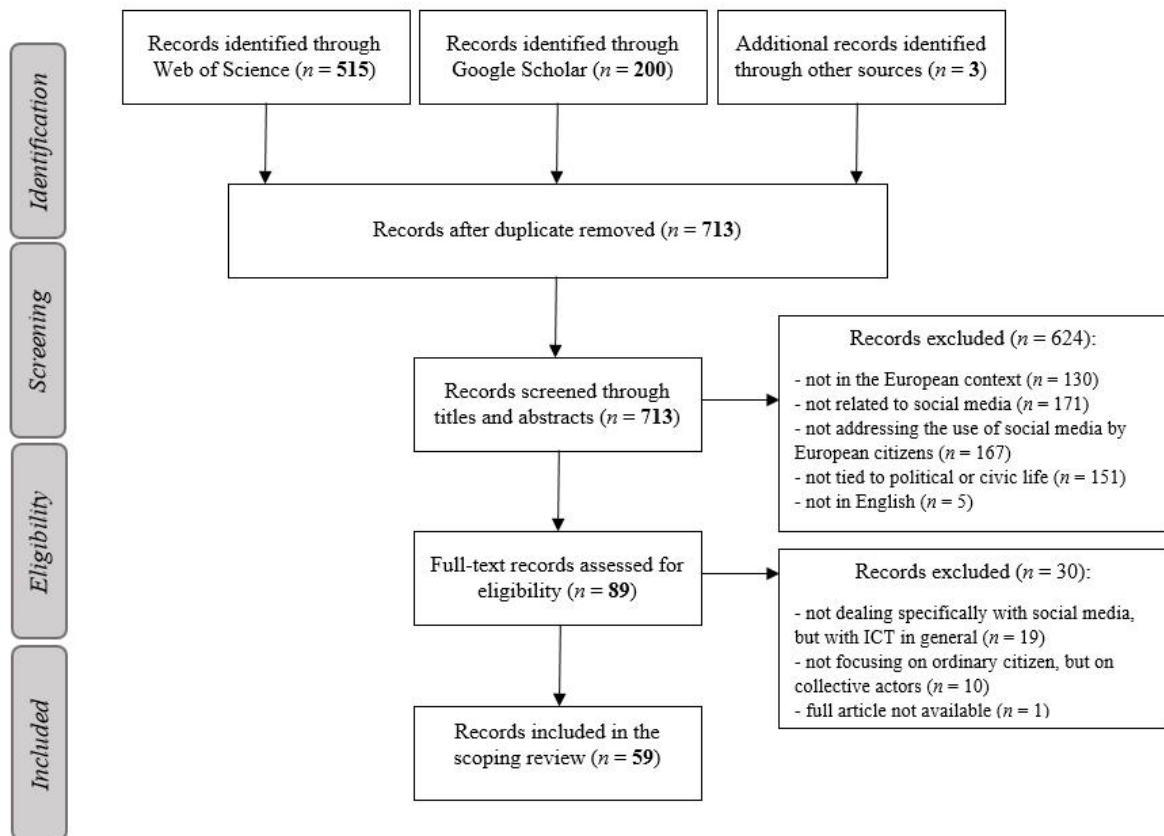
To obtain our sources, we used the Web Of Science core collection database and entered the following search terms: TS = (("social media" OR SNS OR "social network" OR "digital media" OR blog OR Facebook OR Instagram OR Twitter OR LinkedIn OR Snapchat OR YouTube) AND (European OR Europe OR "EU" OR euro OR "European union")) AND (citizen OR citizenship OR "political engagement" OR "political participation" OR "civic engagement" OR "civic participation" OR "civic life" OR "vote" OR "social capital" OR "political identity" OR "European identity" OR "euro-identity" OR "national identity" OR "political trust" OR "political information" OR "Eurocepticism" OR "Euroceptic") NOT (party OR parties OR journalist OR "media coverage"). The search yielded 515 hits on November 15, 2022.

We then completed our search using the Google Scholar database. This search system is less advanced but there are more unpublished documents, such as preprints, to be found (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Given the lack of functionality, the number of hits can be immeasurable. The results were therefore ranked by relevance and the search stopped when records became irrelevant (for a similar approach, see (Valkenburg, van Driel, & Beyens, 2021). We used the same search terms. The search yielded 55200 hits, and we stopped at page 20 (200 hits) on November 15, 2022.

Finally, in accordance with the guidelines for conducting a scoping review (Peters et al., 2020), we have supplemented the search process for additional records. To do this, we first used the Research rabbit platform that allows finding references similar to a set of articles, based on their citations (<https://www.researchrabbit.ai/>). We also checked the references cited in a thematic issue editorial on citizens' engagement with European policies through social media (de Wilde, Rasch, & Bossetta, 2022). This method allowed us to identify three additional records.

## Data Extraction

The PRISMA flow diagram (**Figure 1**) summarizes the data extraction. We started by identifying the records. After deleting duplicates, we screened titles and abstracts for assessment against the eligibility criteria. Next, we assessed the full text of the selected records (the full text of one record was not available). The scoping review resulted in 59 records that met our inclusion criteria.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA Flow Diagram

## Data Analysis

We coded each record according to the type of source, the research fields, the research methods, the European countries, the spheres of civic life, the social media platforms, the social media characteristics, and the citizens' characteristics. The analysis table is available online at OSF ([https://osf.io/z4t8d/?view\\_only=11063797e31e48b6a2cf9e7b1e67f61a](https://osf.io/z4t8d/?view_only=11063797e31e48b6a2cf9e7b1e67f61a)).

## Features of the Included Records

**Type of source.** Over 89% of the records are journal articles; there are also three conference papers, one preprint, one book chapter, and one Ph.D. thesis. Although we did not enter any time constraints when searching for literature, the oldest record is from 2012 (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

**Research fields.** Most research took place in the field of the social sciences, with more than 71% of the obtained records originating from political science and communication. It is also interesting to note the presence of emerging fields, such as digital migration studies (Creta, 2021) and political marketing (Pich et al., 2018).

**Research Methods.** The employed methodologies are diverse: 33.90% made use of qualitative methods, 57.63% of quantitative methods, and 8.48% used a mixed methods approach. Among the qualitative studies, half of them are content analyses of social media publications, and the other half are argumentative essays or interviews. Among the quantitative studies, more than 76% used cross-sectional methods, either on the basis of National, International or European surveys (mainly Eurobarometer) or by constructing a new survey (mean of participants when specified = 2743.71<sup>2</sup>). Moreover, the quantitative studies also encompass five longitudinal studies (Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Ohme, 2019; Pich et al., 2018; Vaccari, Chadwick, & O'Loughlin, 2015a), two computational or network analyses (Rajabi, Mantzaris, Atwal, & Garibay, 2021; Stratoudaki, 2022) and one experimental study with vignettes (Knuth et al., 2016). Finally, it is notable that all studies using mixed methods relied on social network or computational analysis approaches with

<sup>2</sup> Of the records, two studies used the same data set. To get the average number of participants within the studies with original data, we did the calculations by removing one of these studies.



content analyses of social media publications.

European countries. Among the total of 59 records, 45 records specified the number of countries examined (mean = 5.73). For 42 records, the names of specific countries are also mentioned: Germany (16/42) and the United Kingdom (15/42) are the most studied. Other countries that are also frequently mentioned are Italy (13/42), Greece (10/42), Sweden (9/42), France (8/42), Poland (8/42), Netherlands (7/42), and Spain (6/42). Finally, only a limited number of studies focused on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021; Burean, 2019; Maziashvili, Plesniak, & Kowalik, 2022; Placek, 2017). Some of these countries are former communist countries, which implies a different political and social context. These new democracies are marked by less trust in the government, in part because they are often criticized for corruption (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002).

## RESULTS

### RQ1. What Characterizes European Citizens' Use of Social Media in the Context of Civic Life?

As can be seen in the mind map (Figure 2), we have grouped social media and citizen characteristics into five areas: social media features (the "What"), citizen characteristics (the "Who"), social media usage types (the "How"), citizens' motivations to use social media (the "Why"), and the context of social media use (the "When"). We will present results corresponding to each of these characteristics in the following sections.

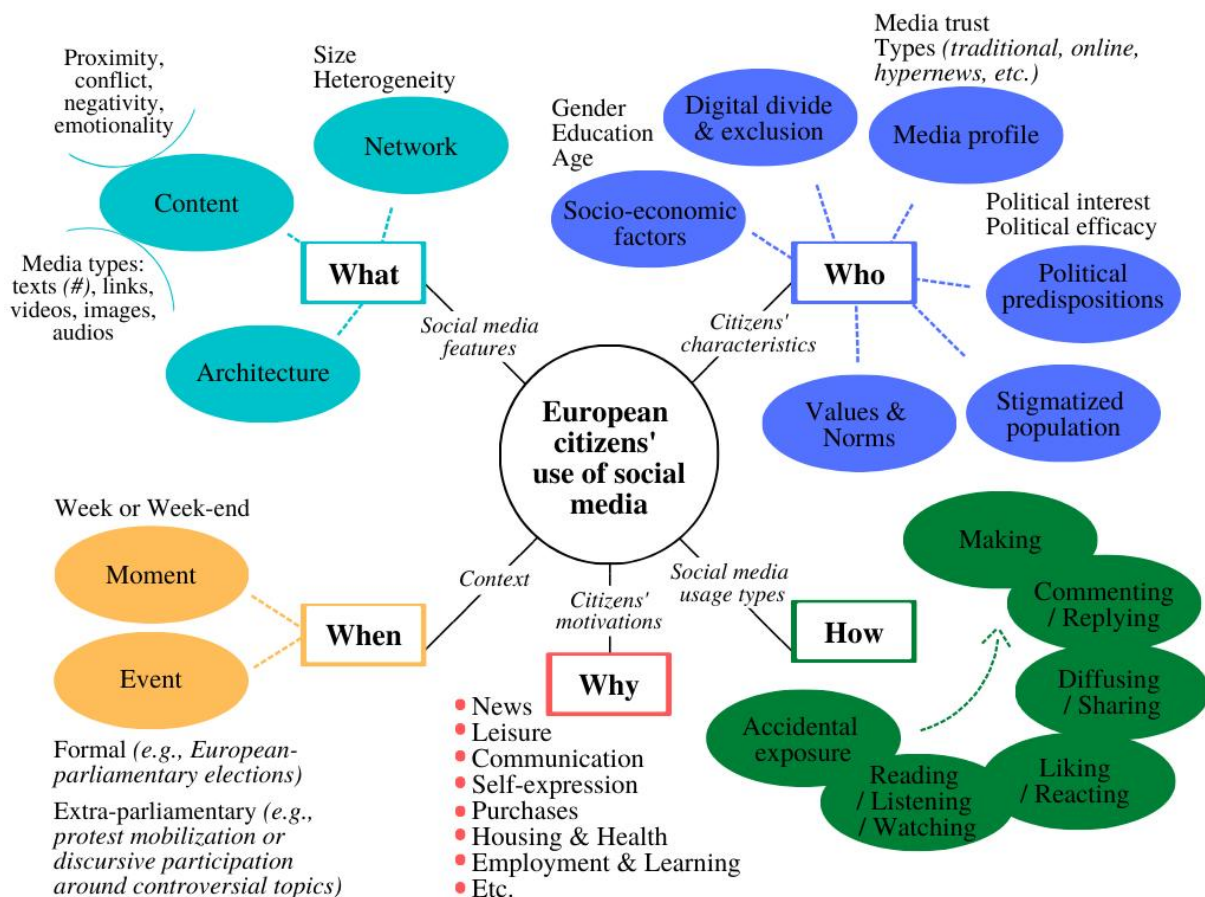


Figure 2. Mind Map of the Scoping Review Findings on European Citizens' Use of Social Media

### What – Social Media Features

Among the obtained records, 49.15% deal with social media in general without differentiating between platforms. Many records also focused on a single platform (37.29%) with the vast majority focusing on Facebook or Twitter. It is worth noting that some studies deal with social media that are less represented in the literature, such as YouTube (Horsti, 2017; Knuth, Szymczak, Kuectiekbalaban, & Schmidt, 2016) or Wikipedia (Kopf, 2022). When social media platforms are compared, it is most often a comparison between Twitter and Facebook. For

example, Mosca and Quaranta (2016) showed that Twitter users are more likely to engage in non-institutional protests in comparison to Facebook users. It should be noted, however, that the platforms used also seem to depend on contextual factors. For example, regarding the relationship with local authorities, Maziashvili et al. (2022) found that Polish perceived social media as more useful than Georgians, and that Georgians used more Facebook than Polish. They explain these results by the fact that Georgia is a developing economy in Europe, whereas Poland is a more mature economy which is further advanced in the use of digital tools.

Other social media features include network size and heterogeneity (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021), social media content (Gálvez-Rodríguez, Haro-de-Rosario, García-Tabuyo, & Caba-Perez, 2019; Heidenreich, Eisele, Watanabe, & Boomgaarden, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2021) or architecture (Bossetta et al., 2017). For example, Heidenreich and colleagues (2022) distinguished social media EU-related news based on content features of the posts: the geographical proximity of the event for citizens, whether a conflict was mentioned, and the negativity and emotionality of the news. Finally, although the majority of studies focused on textual content, other media types are taken into account as well, especially videos (Horsti, 2017) and images (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Marchal Neudert, Kollanyi, & Howard, 2021).

### **Who - Citizens' Characteristics**

Many records are addressing characteristics of European citizens and how they relate to the use of social media. These characteristics include sociodemographic factors, such as gender, age, and education (Allaste & Saari, 2020; Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Holt et al., 2013; Keating & Melis, 2017; Ohme, 2019). For example, Holt et al. (Holt et al., 2013) showed that interest in politics and political participation increased with age in Sweden. Meanwhile, Paolillo and Gerbaudo (Paolillo & Gerbaudo, 2022) showed that young people were increasingly involved in politics in Italy, particularly due to social media, albeit towards parties regarded as populist.

Other characteristics were also investigated such as media profiles (Castro et al., 2022), political predisposition (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević, 2012), and values and norms (Burean, 2019; Theocharis et al., 2016). For example, compared to other countries, Greeks showed more negative attitudes toward traditional media and used social media as their primary source of information (Kalogeropoulos, Rori, & Dimitrakopoulou, 2021).

Finally, several records focus on stigmatized populations, such as migrants, women, or people of color (Galpin, 2022; Yantseva, 2022). The notion of the digital divide or exclusion is highly discussed (Theocharis, van Deth, Obert, & Cisař, 2016). These factors are crucial, given that Europe is composed of different countries that differ in terms of culture and access to technology.

### **How - Social Media Usage Types**

The records reveal a wide range of ways in which European citizens make use of social media. These behaviors are diverse: accidental exposure, watching, reacting, sharing, replying or creating a publication (Allaste & Saari, 2020; Bossetta et al., 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Wallaschek et al., 2022). However, the records do not explicitly distinguish between passive (consumption) and active (expressive) activities. Instead, the records established a relationship between the degree of resources required from users to carry out the activity and their degree of political engagement. For example, reading a publication is less engaging than reacting to it, which is less engaging than commenting on it and which is less engaging than creating a new publication (Gálvez-Rodríguez, Haro-de-Rosario, García-Tabuyo, & Caba-Perez, 2019; Heidenreich et al., 2022). Finally, specific usage types are also studied, such as Dual Screening, which is the act of combining "consumption and commentary during media events" (Vaccari et al., 2015b, p. 1041).

### **Why - Citizens' Motivations to Use Social Media**

There are only a limited number of records that address the various reasons for social media use by European citizens. This is because most studies either focus on general use of social media or social media use to follow the news (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; González-González et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2013; Nardis, 2014; Petrović & Bešić, 2019; Placek, 2017). Interestingly, Alencar's (2018) study highlights a wide range of motivations for refugees in Europe to use social media including leisure, communication, housing, health, language learning, and migration procedures. Marchal et al. (2021) discussed the use of political humor on social media through memes, cartoons or drawings. Several reasons can lead citizens to use political humor on social media. The primary objective is not necessarily to make people laugh but sometimes to attack political and economic elites, to express an opinion or to build a community.

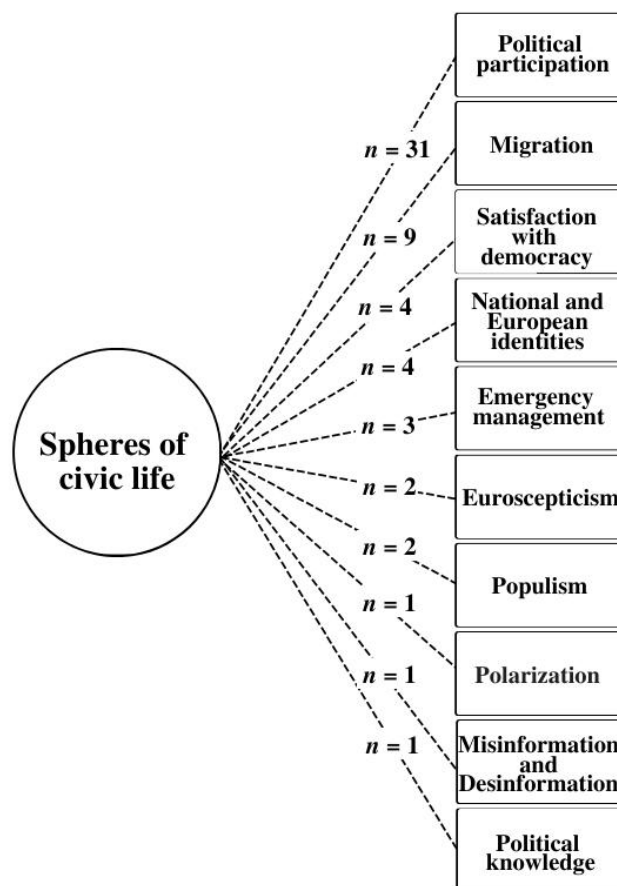
### **When - Context of the Utilization**

The context of social media use is a largely unexplored topic. However, Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. (2019) looked

at the timing of social media posts (i.e., during the week or the weekend) in order to get a more comprehensive view of emergency management. De Wilde et al. (2022) also highlighted the context of social media posts: formal (i.e., linked to official political authorities) or extra-parliamentary (i.e., non-formal). For example, the former can refer to European parliamentary elections, while the latter can refer to citizen mobilizations.

### RQ2. How Does Social Media Use Impact Civic Life in Europe and Which Factors Influence this Relationship?

As can be seen in **Figure 3**, 10 spheres of civic life are covered by the literature: political participation, migration, satisfaction with democracy, national and European identities, emergency management, Euroscepticism, populism, polarization, misinformation and disinformation, and political knowledge<sup>3</sup>. In the following sections, we will summarize how social media impacts each of these spheres and how the factors discussed in the previous section ("what", "who", "how", "why", and "when") influence the nature of this impact.



**Figure 3.** An Overview of the Findings of the Present Scoping Review on the Relationship Between Social Media Use and the Spheres of Civic Life in a European Context

#### Political Participation

The most often studied sphere of civic life is related to political participation (31 records). The records are consistent and show that overall, the use of social media by Europeans is positively associated with political participation, offline and online (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021; Allaste & Saari, 2020; Bossetta et al., 2017; de Wilde et al., 2022; Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Heidenreich et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2013; Kopf, 2022; Maziashvili et al., 2022; Nardis, 2014; Ohme, 2019; Paolillo & Gerbaudo, 2022; Pejic-Bach, Zoroja, & Ćurko, 2018; Pich et al., 2018; Štětka & Mazák, 2014; Vaccari, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015a; Vaccariv et al., 2015b; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević, 2012; Wallaschek et al., 2022). Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) showed that even accidental exposure to political information on social media can be positively associated with online participation.

It should be mentioned that political participation can encompass a wide range of actions, such as electoral

<sup>3</sup> One record focused solely on the use of social media by European citizens, without examining the impact of this use on civic life.



participation, volunteering or protesting (Theocharis & Deth, 2018). Several studies have therefore specifically addressed political protests and in particular, digitally networked participation (Barisione, Michailidou, & Airoldi, 2019; Burean, 2019; Mosca & Quaranta, 2016; Sloam, 2018; Theocharis et al., 2016). Indeed, social media are ideal spaces for collective action, as they can be used to criticize traditional sources of information. As shown by Evolvi (2019), the mainstream media can convey stereotypes, particularly about Muslims who are portrayed as "bad Arabs" in Europe. In addition, Lie (2018) showed that both social media and local newspapers contributed to civic engagement in Norway, but the forms were different: Facebook actually enabled volunteering and mobilization, while local newspapers provided information on community life. Of note, Norway remains one of the countries with the highest readership of local newspapers in Europe (Lie, 2018).

However, some records provided nuance to the conclusion that social media stimulates political participation. First, one study showed that the relationship between social media and political participation depends on existing political interests: social media is mainly beneficial for interested user groups (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021). A study of Britons showed that the use of social media did not engage all young adults in civic life, but only those interested in politics (Keating & Melis, 2017). Second, there are differences between countries, especially between new and old democracies. For example, engagement in protests in Romania was associated positively with online political participation, but also with post-materialist values, reflecting the shift in values among Romania's new generations (Burean, 2019). In addition, Allaste and Saari (2020) showed that Estonian youth needed a stronger feeling of security and distance in order to participate politically compared to Finnish youth. For example, they felt more comfortable sharing political content on social media when it was parodic or humorous in nature. The cases of Estonia and Finland can indeed be considered as examples of new and old democracies (Allaste & Saari, 2020). Third, Bossetta et al. (2017) demonstrated how political engagement and content on social media depend on social media architecture: Facebook favors posting and commenting on moral content while Twitter favors factual or partisan content. Finally, several records have focused on inequalities in political participation (Galpin, 2022; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Theocharis et al., 2016). While Theocharis et al.'s (2016) study demonstrated that digitally networked participation can to some extent reduce participation inequalities, Galpin (2022) highlighted that offline inequalities related to gender and race persist in the digital public sphere. Grasso and Smith (2022) found only small differences in overall political participation between men and women, although men and women did not use the same repertoires of action.

### **Migration**

Addressed by nine records, the second most studied sphere of civic life is related to migration (Alencar, 2018; Creta, 2021; Giglou, d'Haenens, & Ogan, 2017; Hafner, 2022; Horsti, 2017; Lassen, 2018; Morell, 2018; Stavinoha, 2019; Yantseva, 2022). These records are directly related to the European context as they typically pertain to the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe. Interestingly, these studies focused on people of the host countries and people in transit. In all records, use of social media was found to have overall positive implications. For example, several studies showed that refugees use social media to facilitate integration in the host country (Alencar, 2018) but also to protest for better living conditions (Creta, 2021; Stavinoha, 2019). Studies on host countries also showed how social media can be used to reconstruct the collective memory and representation of migrants (Horsti, 2017). In the vast majority of records, people in transit were presented as active actors rather than passive victims, and social media acts as a tool to give them a voice.

Similar to political participation, there are nuances regarding the overall positive impact of social media on migration topics. Yantseva (2022) showed that although the use of Facebook by European citizens can lead to the creation of an affective publics who care about the well-being of people in transit, Facebook use may also lead to discursive discrimination and objectification, especially towards migrants.

### **Satisfaction with Democracy**

Another sphere of civic life studied by four records is related to satisfaction with democracy (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Fan & Zhang, 2021; Petrović & Bešić, 2019; Placek, 2017). However, evidence on the relationship between social media use and satisfaction with democracy is mixed. Petrović and Bešić (2019) revealed that the more citizens perceive elections as democratic in their country, the less they use social media to obtain political information and the more they rely on TV and newspapers. Similarly, Ceron and Memoli (2016) found a negative association between use of social media for news consumption and satisfaction with democracy. In contrast, Placek's (2017) study within Central and Eastern Europe showed a positive association between social media use and support for institutions and government. It should be noted that in Placek's study, the results were found for general social media use whereas the previous two studies (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Petrović & Bešić, 2019) focused on social media use for news consumption. Finally, Fan and Zhang (2021) pointed out that the democratic potential of social media depends on whether citizens are regular social media users and whether they trust these platforms.

### **National and European Identities**

Only four studies looked at notions of identity, and none explored national and European identity simultaneously. The results showed that social media can contribute to the construction and maintenance of a European identity (Bebić, eEraković, & Vučković, 2017; Ejaz, 2020). Moreover, Stratoudaki's (2022) study highlighted that citizens' discourses on Twitter can make national identity salient when it is threatened. Evolvi (2019) discussed how blogs, and in particular the Yalla blog, can help manage a hybrid - Italian Muslim - identity in a predominantly Christian country like Italy.

### **Emergency Management**

Three records highlighted that social media can be used as a management tool in case of emergency (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Kaufhold & Reuter, 2016; Knuth et al., 2016). Several emergency situations have been investigated: power blackouts, fire, terrorist attacks or floods. They again reflect the European context with examples including the 2015 Paris attacks (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019) or the 2013 European floods (Kaufhold & Reuter, 2016).

### **Euroscepticism, Populism and Polarization**

Five records addressed Euroscepticism, populism or polarization; these concepts are not interchangeable, but they are often used together in the literature. Use of social media for news consumption was found to be positively associated with Euroscepticism; the same holds for expression of political humor on social media, especially on Twitter (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; Marchal et al., 2021). The results are more inconclusive regarding populism. Thiele (Thiele, 2022) found few populist comments on Facebook, although posts related to the Covid-19 pandemic had received more populist comments. González-González et al. (2022) did not find an association between populism and the use of social media for news. However, when distinguishing between platforms, they found that populist attitudes were positively associated with use of Facebook and negatively associated with use of Twitter. Finally, Rajabi et al. (2021) showed that during periods of polarization, such as the 2016 UK-EU referendum, the most influential users - in terms of followers - received the most attention but nevertheless, the least influential users also continued to be active.

### **Political Knowledge and Misinformation and Disinformation**

Finally, two records have also explored whether social media can empower European citizens to expand their political knowledge. Castro et al. (2022) examined the relationship between different ways of following the news and political knowledge. The results showed a positive association when news was consumed online or through traditional media, but they did not reveal any association when news was consumed through social media. The authors did point out, however, that there are notable differences between two groups of countries (Castro et al., 2022). The first was Norway, Switzerland, Denmark and Australia, which are small, welfare-oriented countries where the media system is consensual. The second group was Greece, Italy, Spain and France, all Mediterranean countries, where the media system is plural and polarized. In addition, Hameleers et al. (2022) showed that the more misinformation and disinformation citizens perceive, the greater their use of social media and the more they use social media as an alternative source of information. Their study also highlighted country-level differences: the perception of misinformation and disinformation was stronger in countries where press freedom is limited, such as Hungary.

## **DISCUSSION**

The rise of social media has raised concerns about their potential to reshape the democratic process. While social media transcends national borders, addressing their impact on civic life requires taking into account regional disparities (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). However, there remains a scarcity of research focused on the European context, despite its distinctive cultural, historical and political characteristics. We, therefore, conducted a scoping review of 59 records on the relationship between social media use and civic life in Europe. The objective was to provide an overview of this literature that may inform future research and provide relevant insights for policymakers and citizens.

Our first research question pertained to the social media usage characteristics among European citizens. Several key factors need to be considered in this regard. We have summarized these factors into five categories: social media features ("What"), citizens' characteristics ("Who"), social media usage types ("How"), citizens' motivations to use social media ("Why"), and the context of social media use ("When"). The "What" has not been

systematically examined and there is a strong focus on Facebook and Twitter while blogs or other social networking sites have been hardly examined. In contrast, the "Who" has been investigated in depth (Allaste & Saari, 2020; Burean, 2019; Castro et al., 2022; Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; Grasso & Smith, 2022; Theocharis et al., 2016; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević, 2012). This is no surprise as Europe is composed of many countries with different cultures and levels of economic development. The "How" covers a variety of usage types, ranging from accidental exposure to proactively writing social media posts (Allaste & Saari, 2020; Bossetta et al., 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Wallaschek et al., 2022). As expected, the focus of the "Why" category has been mainly on social media use to follow the news (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; González-González et al., 2022; Nardis, 2014; Petrović & Bešić, 2019; Placek, 2017). Finally, the "When" is still understudied, although initial research highlights the importance of the timing of social media use (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Our second research question pertained to how use of social media impacts European civic life. Social media was found to impact several spheres of European civic life: political participation, migration, satisfaction with democracy, national and European identities, emergency management, Euroscepticism, populism, polarization, misinformation and disinformation, and political knowledge.

Contrary to concerns raised about a possible negative impact of social media on civic life (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), the majority of records revealed a positive association between social media and political participation in a European context (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021; Allaste & Saari, 2020; Bossetta et al., 2017; de Wilde et al., 2022; Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Heidenreich et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2013; Kopf, 2022; Maziashvili et al., 2022; Nardis, 2014; Ohme, 2019; Paolillo & Gerbaudo, 2022; Pejic-Bach et al., 2018; Pich et al., 2018; Štětka & Mazák, 2014; Vaccari, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015a; Vaccari et al., 2015b; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević, 2012; Wallaschek et al., 2022). This research has therefore provided some nuance to concerns regarding the phenomena on social media of slacktivism (Ekström & Shehata, 2018; Vaccari et al., 2015b) or polarization and populism (Thiele, 2022).

However, a wide range of factors appears to play an important role in nuancing this relationship (Bossetta et al., 2017; Galpin, 2022). One of the primary factors concerns the reasons for using social media: using social media in general is not always enough to positively impact political participation, citizens must use them with the purpose of being informed of the news. In addition, citizen characteristics are also essential to consider (Allaste & Saari, 2020; Burean, 2019). One cannot consider that the relationship between social media use and European civic life is the same for all individuals, regardless of their age, gender, level of education, values, or country of origin. Evidence on the possible influence of social media features or social media usage types is still limited (Bossetta et al., 2017). The same is true for the context of social media use and future research is necessary to examine the possible impact of these factors on the influence of social media on political participation.

The other spheres of civic life have been less often investigated, but some tentative conclusions can be made. Social media was found to be relevant in the context of migration, both to facilitate integration in the host country (Alencar, 2018; Evolvi, 2019) and to protest for better living conditions (Creta, 2021; Stavinoha, 2019). Social media platforms can also act as a powerful tool for managing emergency situations at transnational and national levels (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Kaufhold & Reuter, 2016; Knuth et al., 2016). Moreover, the records indicated that use of social media helps to strengthen collective identity, European identity and national identity (Bebić et al., 2017; Ejaz, 2020; Stratoudaki, 2022). However, it should be noted that social media use was also positively associated with Eurosceptic attitudes (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; Marchal et al., 2021). Regarding satisfaction with democracy, the results were mixed (Ceron & Memoli, 2016; Fan & Zhang, 2021; Petrović & Bešić, 2019; Placek, 2017). The other spheres of civic life - populism, polarization, political knowledge, and misinformation - either showed inconclusive results or have been studied by only one record. It is therefore complicated to draw conclusions about the impact of social media on these spheres of civic life in a European context.

Although some of the factors identified transcend national borders and have been identified in previous literature (Boulianne, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Skoric et al., 2016), this scoping review also provides an overview of the dynamics that have affected Europe in recent years and the way they have impacted the civic life of its citizens. Numerous records have dealt, for example, with the perception of migrants in Europe following the migration crises (Creta, 2021; Horsti, 2017; Lassen, 2018; Yantseva, 2022) or with the Muslim presence in Europe after the terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo in 2015 (Evolvi, 2019). Other studies have emphasized the significance of Brexit in the European context (Galpin, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2021; Stavinoha, 2019). These analyses have drawn attention to the concurrent surge of populism, notably observed in countries such as Italy, Hungary or Portugal (González-González et al., 2022; Hameleers et al., 2022; Paolillo & Gerbaudo, 2022). Additionally, specific investigations have delved into distinct events and phenomena within Europe, such as the 2013 floods

(Kaufhold & Reuter, 2016). Certain records have concentrated on the European elections (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016; Vaccari, 2017; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Vesnić-Alujević, 2012). European elections are distinctive in the sense that they involve transnational political participation that cannot be comprehensively understood through the prism of national elections alone. Meanwhile, the scholarly discourse has also extended to encompass the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the European context (Thiele, 2022). Lastly, a segment of the literature has dedicated attention to the implications of the geopolitical shifts for former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Maziashvili et al., 2022; Placek, 2017). Therefore, this multifaceted exploration significantly contributes to fostering a comprehensive understanding of both the European landscape and the role of social media within this context.

To conclude, future research is necessary to further expand the evidence base and we believe that four aspects should be considered when designing these future studies.

First, most prior quantitative studies relied on cross-sectional designs. Unfortunately, this type of methodology does not allow for causal conclusions. As such, it is unclear whether social media use leads to political participation or whether people who are already politically engaged are using social media more often (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2021). Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to better separate cause and effect (Oser & Boulianne, 2020).

Second, different social media platforms are characterized by different affordances and architectures and future research is necessary to examine how these platform differences impact the relationship between social media and civic life (Masciantonio, Bourguignon, Bouchat, Balty, & Rimé, 2021). For example, it is not clear how TikTok usage affects civic life, given that the platform is predominantly utilized by young people and is centered around video content.

Third, this scoping review highlighted that prior literature on the impact of social media on civic life in a European context mainly focused on one sphere of civic life, namely political participation. Although this is a key indicator of civic life, other spheres are also of major importance and future research should expand its focus.

Last but not least, this scoping review showed the overall paucity of research carried out in the European context. However, the results demonstrated that there are substantial and significant differences between European countries. Understanding these differences can provide valuable insights for developing tailored strategies and policies that address the unique needs and challenges faced by European citizens. Future research should therefore continue to explore how cultural and political differences across European countries influence the relationship between social media use and civic life.

## CONCLUSION

This scoping review does not support concerns that social media would consistently undermine civic life in Europe. Instead, it was found that social media platforms have a positive impact on European civic life, especially when it comes to political participation. However, it is essential to take into account that a wide range of factors may nuance this relationship, including usage types and user characteristics. Future studies are necessary to deepen our understanding of the impact of social media in Europe.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The analysis table is available online at OSF

([https://osf.io/z4t8d/?view\\_only=11063797e31e48b6a2cf9e7b1e67f61a](https://osf.io/z4t8d/?view_only=11063797e31e48b6a2cf9e7b1e67f61a)).



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