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Exposure to News Content in the Digital Communication Environment Through Social Media and Its Relationship with the Political and Cultural Behavior of University of Dhi Qar Students

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Abstract

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between exposure to news content in the digital communication environment of social media and the political and cultural behavior of students at the University of Dhi Qar. The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design. The statistical population consisted of 240 students from the College of Media at the University of Dhi Qar, and 100 complete responses were collected through an electronic questionnaire using non-probability voluntary/self-selection sampling. The instrument comprised demographic characteristics, patterns of news use, a news exposure index, and six items assessing political and cultural outcomes. The face and content validity of the instrument were confirmed through evaluation by five experts in media and communication studies. The overall reliability of the instrument was confirmed during the pilot stage with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, while the internal consistency of the six outcome items was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.812. Data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, Spearman's rank-order correlation, the Friedman test, and Wilcoxon signed-rank pairwise comparisons with Holm correction. The mean news exposure index was 3.14, and the mean political and cultural behavior score was 3.32. A positive and relatively strong relationship was observed between news exposure and overall behavior ($r_s = 0.592$, $p < 0.001$). Exposure to political news was positively associated with political awareness ($r_s = 0.494$), political engagement ($r_s = 0.396$), and public/political participation ($r_s = 0.541$). Exposure to cultural news was also associated with cultural awareness ($r_s = 0.362$), cultural engagement ($r_s = 0.298$), and changes in cultural interests or activities ($r_s = 0.377$). The Friedman test indicated a statistically significant difference in the rankings of news types ($\chi^2 = 31.26$, $p < 0.001$), although the effect size was small ($W = 0.104$). The findings indicate that, for these students, social media platforms are not merely channels for accessing news; rather, they are associated with reported patterns of awareness, discussion, and participation. Nevertheless, the cross-sectional design and voluntary sample do not permit causal inference or generalization to all university students in Iraq.

Keywords: digital communication; social media; news content; political behavior; cultural behavior; Iraqi university students



1. Introduction

The expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the ways in which individuals encounter, interpret, and respond to public information. Social media platforms, in particular, have become central components of contemporary news ecosystems because they combine interpersonal communication, institutional content, algorithmic distribution, user-generated material, and real-time interaction within a single communicative environment. Whereas news consumption was once primarily structured by relatively stable relationships between professional media organizations and audiences, digital platforms have created a more fluid environment in which users simultaneously receive, evaluate, redistribute, comment on, and sometimes produce news-related content. This transformation has altered not only patterns of information access but also the processes through which political awareness, civic engagement, cultural orientation, and collective identity are constructed. The emergence of what has been described as a hybrid media system reflects the increasing interdependence of legacy media, digital platforms, political actors, and networked publics, with power increasingly exercised through interactions across multiple communication channels rather than through a single dominant medium (Chadwick, 2017). At the same time, network media logic has introduced distinctive principles of circulation, visibility, connectivity, and user participation that affect the organization of political communication and the distribution of public attention (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Consequently, understanding exposure to news on social media requires attention not merely to the quantity of media use, but to the types of news encountered and the political and cultural behaviors associated with such exposure.

The growing importance of social media as a news environment is particularly consequential for university students. University students represent a social group characterized by relatively intensive use of digital technologies, frequent interaction with networked communication systems, and continuing development of political, civic, and cultural orientations. Their exposure to social media news may therefore affect how they understand national affairs, engage in political discussion, participate in public life, and interpret cultural values and identities. The significance of this issue is amplified in high-choice media environments, where individuals are confronted with an unprecedented abundance of news and non-news content, multiple sources of political information, and considerable freedom in selecting what they consume. Such conditions expand opportunities for information acquisition but may also contribute to selective exposure, fragmentation, avoidance of challenging perspectives, and inequalities in political knowledge (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The structure of contemporary digital communication thus creates an environment in which political and cultural consequences depend not only on access to information but also on users' choices, platform architectures, social connections, perceived credibility of sources, and the salience of particular topics. For university students, whose attitudes and participation patterns may still be developing, these processes can be especially relevant to the formation of political awareness and broader forms of social engagement.

One of the theoretical mechanisms through which news exposure may influence political and cultural behavior is agenda-setting. The agenda-setting perspective emphasizes that the prominence and repetition of issues in media environments can affect the importance audiences attach to those issues. Although digital media have complicated the traditional relationship between news organizations and audiences, the underlying principle that patterns of information exposure shape perceptions of issue salience remains highly relevant (McCombs, 2005). Social media platforms extend this process because news prominence is influenced not only by editorial decisions but also by algorithms, interpersonal sharing, trending systems, network structures, and users' previous interactions. Consequently, repeated exposure to political content may increase the salience of governmental affairs, national issues, elections, public debates, and civic concerns, while exposure to cultural content may enhance attention to cultural events, traditions, identity, artistic practices, and social values. In this sense, social media news exposure may contribute to behavioral consequences by first affecting awareness and issue salience, which may subsequently stimulate discussion, participation, or changes in cultural interests. These mechanisms are especially important in studies that distinguish between political and cultural news because the behavioral pathways associated with different forms of content may not be identical.

The digital public sphere provides another important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between social media news and political behavior. Contemporary communication technologies have broadened opportunities for citizens to access political information, articulate views, encounter alternative perspectives, and participate in public discussion. Nevertheless, the digital transformation of the public sphere is accompanied by structural tensions, including fragmentation, commercialization, platform power, declining shared informational spaces, and the circulation of strategic or manipulative



content (Habermas, 2022). Social media can therefore simultaneously enhance public communication and weaken some of the conditions required for reasoned democratic deliberation. From a critical perspective, digital platforms should not be understood as neutral technological channels because their economic models, ownership structures, algorithms, and mechanisms of data extraction influence which forms of communication become visible and how users interact with information (Fuchs, 2021). The political consequences of social media news exposure must therefore be examined empirically rather than assumed to be inherently democratizing or inherently harmful. In practice, the same platforms that facilitate political awareness and participation may also intensify polarization, misinformation, harassment, selective exposure, and distrust.

The diversity of information encountered on social media is a particularly important dimension of this problem. Research on Facebook has demonstrated that exposure to ideologically cross-cutting news is shaped both by algorithmic ranking and by users' own choices, indicating that technological and behavioral mechanisms jointly structure news diversity (Bakshy et al., 2015). Accordingly, individuals do not encounter political information in an entirely random manner. Their networks, prior preferences, platform behaviors, and algorithmic recommendations may create patterns of exposure that reinforce certain topics and viewpoints while reducing encounters with others. This becomes particularly relevant when assessing political awareness and participation because repeated exposure to particular political issues may encourage engagement while selective exposure may narrow the range of perspectives users consider. The broader political communication literature consequently suggests that digital news exposure is best conceptualized as a multidimensional experience involving frequency, content type, source, diversity, credibility, and interaction rather than as a simple measure of time spent online. In the present study, this distinction is important because political and cultural news exposure are examined as meaningful components of the wider digital news experience.

Trust and credibility are also central to the relationship between exposure and behavior. Users' willingness to consume, share, discuss, or act on news is influenced by their judgments regarding the reliability of information and news providers. Trust in news media is a multidimensional construct involving perceptions of topic selection, factual accuracy, journalistic assessment, and the representation of information (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). In digital settings, these judgments become more complex because information from professional journalism, political actors, influencers, acquaintances, anonymous accounts, and algorithmically recommended sources can appear within the same interface. Users therefore frequently rely on cognitive heuristics, source cues, familiarity, social endorsement, and other signals to evaluate the credibility of online information (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Research has also shown that skepticism toward news media does not necessarily result in complete avoidance of news; individuals may continue to consume information from sources they do not fully trust because of interest, habit, surveillance needs, or the structure of available media choices (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Furthermore, trust can influence both online news consumption and participatory behavior, suggesting that credibility judgments may shape whether news exposure remains passive or develops into discussion, sharing, and civic involvement (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

These concerns highlight the importance of news literacy in digital communication. In social media environments, users must do more than simply access news; they must distinguish journalistic information from other content, evaluate sources, recognize persuasive intent, verify claims, and decide whether information should be shared or acted upon. News literacy behaviors therefore encompass the practical application of knowledge and competencies to the evaluation and use of news (Vraga et al., 2021). Such competencies are particularly relevant to university students because high levels of social media use do not necessarily imply a high capacity to assess information quality. Exposure to political and cultural news may foster knowledge and participation when information is evaluated critically, yet the same exposure may contribute to misinformation or distorted perceptions when users lack effective verification practices. Therefore, the relationship between news exposure and behavior should be interpreted within a broader informational environment in which credibility, verification, selective attention, and platform dynamics interact.

The Iraqi communication environment provides a particularly important context for examining these issues. Social media have become deeply embedded in the circulation of public information in Iraq, where political developments, social events, public controversies, and cultural issues are increasingly discussed through digital platforms. Previous research conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that social media could intensify fear and panic by rapidly



circulating information and emotionally charged content, illustrating the capacity of digital platforms to influence psychological and social responses during periods of uncertainty (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). Similarly, research on Iraqi students has shown that social media can operate simultaneously as an information resource and a channel through which misinformation and conspiracy-related content circulate. Evidence concerning COVID-19 disinformation among Iraqi students highlights the ambiguity of social media as both a potentially valuable watchdog mechanism and an environment conducive to misinformation (Numan, 2023). These findings demonstrate that the influence of social media in Iraq cannot be reduced to simple access to information; instead, outcomes depend on the nature, credibility, and social circulation of the content encountered.

The Iraqi digital sphere is also shaped by contested political communication and pressures on journalists and news organizations. Research examining networked trolling directed toward critical journalists and news organizations in Iraq has documented how coordinated or networked forms of online hostility can affect journalistic actors and public discourse (Al-Rawi et al., 2023). Such patterns are significant because the political information encountered by university students is produced and circulated within this broader communication environment. Exposure to political news may occur alongside partisan messaging, criticism, harassment, counter-discourse, and strategic communication, making social media simultaneously a site of information acquisition and political contestation. This complex environment reinforces the need for empirical research that examines how students themselves report relationships between their news exposure and their political orientations and behaviors rather than assuming uniform effects based on platform use alone.

Recent Iraqi research provides more direct evidence that social media may be associated with political awareness and participation among university students. Hussein examined the role of social media networks in spreading political awareness among Iraqi university students and its relationship with activating political participation, emphasizing the significance of digital platforms as spaces for political information and engagement (Hussein, 2024). This line of inquiry is highly relevant because political participation rarely emerges independently of informational exposure. Political news can introduce students to policy debates, national events, public problems, governmental decisions, and competing political positions, potentially increasing their sense of political awareness and encouraging discussion or participation. However, awareness, interaction, and participation should be treated as analytically distinct outcomes. Students may become more informed without engaging in political discussion, or they may discuss political issues without participating in formal or public political activities. A multidimensional assessment is therefore required to distinguish these different behavioral consequences of political news exposure.

The influence of social media extends beyond political behavior to the cultural domain. Digital communication facilitates exposure to cultural practices, symbols, lifestyles, traditions, entertainment, language, values, and identity narratives drawn from both local and transnational environments. Cultural identity is consequently subject to continuous negotiation in virtual social networks, particularly among young adults. Research has demonstrated that students' cultural identities may change through processes occurring in virtual social networks, reflecting the interaction of online communication, social relationships, cultural content, and identity reconstruction (Ghahremani et al., 2024). Studies of students using platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram have similarly identified a range of factors influencing cultural identity within social network environments (Latifi et al., 2021). These findings suggest that exposure to cultural news and information may not remain at the level of passive knowledge acquisition but may become associated with changes in cultural awareness, interests, preferences, and activities.

National identity is another dimension through which digital communication may intersect with cultural and political behavior. The quality and pattern of virtual social network use have been associated with national identity, suggesting that social media engagement can influence how individuals relate to national symbols, values, collective belonging, and cultural narratives (Heydari et al., 2021). This relationship is especially relevant in university settings because students are simultaneously exposed to local, national, regional, and global information environments. Their digital news practices may expose them to competing frames of identity and belonging, creating opportunities for both reinforcement and transformation of national and cultural orientations. Importantly, evidence from the University of Dhi Qar itself indicates that social media platforms can play a role in strengthening national identity among students (Duhairish & Abdulrahman, 2025). This local



evidence provides a strong rationale for examining not only political outcomes but also broader cultural behaviors among students in the same university context.

The relationship between digital news exposure and political or cultural behavior should nevertheless be understood as correlational and context-dependent. Social media users differ in their motivations, frequency of use, preferred sources, levels of trust, verification practices, political interest, cultural orientation, and willingness to engage publicly. Moreover, exposure and behavior may influence one another reciprocally. Students with greater political interest may intentionally seek more political news, while greater exposure to political news may also reinforce awareness or participation. Similarly, students with stronger cultural interests may follow more cultural content, while repeated exposure may introduce them to new interests and activities. Such reciprocal relationships are consistent with contemporary understandings of digital communication as an interactive system rather than a one-directional model of media influence. For this reason, cross-sectional correlational research can identify meaningful associations but cannot establish causal direction.

Despite the expanding international literature on social media, news consumption, political communication, credibility, and cultural identity, several gaps remain relevant to the Iraqi university context. First, much of the broader literature has focused on Western media systems or large-scale political communication environments, while the dynamics of digital news use among Iraqi university students remain comparatively underexamined. Second, Iraqi studies have often concentrated on specific outcomes such as political awareness, misinformation, panic, or national identity rather than examining political and cultural outcomes together within the same analytical framework (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Duhairish & Abdulrahman, 2025; Hussein, 2024; Numan, 2023). Third, the distinction between different types of news is important because political and cultural content may be associated with different forms of awareness, engagement, participation, and behavioral change. Fourth, the priority students assign to political, cultural, social, and economic news can provide additional insight into the composition of their digital news environment. Examining both exposure and news preferences therefore offers a more comprehensive understanding of how students navigate contemporary social media information systems.

A further gap concerns the need to integrate established communication concepts with locally grounded empirical evidence. Agenda-setting theory suggests that repeated exposure may shape perceptions of issue importance (McCombs, 2005); hybrid media theory highlights the interaction of traditional and digital communication systems (Chadwick, 2017); network media logic explains the distinct circulation dynamics of social platforms (Klinger & Svensson, 2015); research on high-choice media environments emphasizes the democratic opportunities and risks associated with expanded media choice (Van Aelst et al., 2017); and scholarship on the public sphere raises questions about the consequences of platformization for democratic communication (Habermas, 2022). At the individual level, trust, credibility, and news literacy further shape how exposure translates into attitudes or actions (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Vraga et al., 2021). At the same time, research on selective exposure demonstrates that the information users encounter is partly structured by personal choices and algorithmic processes (Bakshy et al., 2015). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that digital news exposure constitutes a complex communicative experience with potential implications for both political and cultural behavior.

Within the University of Dhi Qar, students of the College of Media constitute a particularly relevant population for studying these relationships. Their academic environment provides direct exposure to concepts related to journalism, news production, communication technologies, public opinion, and media practices. At the same time, they participate in the same social media ecosystem in which political, social, cultural, and economic information circulates continuously. Examining this group can therefore provide insight into how news-related digital communication is associated with political and cultural outcomes among students who have both everyday and educational contact with media. Such an investigation also contributes to a more differentiated understanding of the role of social media by distinguishing political awareness from political engagement and participation, and cultural awareness from cultural engagement and changes in cultural interests or activities. This multidimensional approach avoids treating “political behavior” or “cultural behavior” as single, undifferentiated constructs and enables more precise analysis of the patterns associated with exposure to different types of news.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between exposure to news content in the digital communication environment of social media and the political and cultural behavior of students at the University of Dhi Qar.



2. Methods and Materials

This study was quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational in design. The statistical population consisted of 240 students from the College of Media at the University of Dhi Qar. This population was purposively selected because of its direct educational engagement with news, media, and digital communication; therefore, the scope of inference is limited to this particular university context.

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the study population, and data collection was terminated after 100 complete responses had been received. At the respondent level, non-probability voluntary or self-selection sampling was employed because participation depended on respondents' willingness and accessibility, and neither a random sampling frame nor a lottery-based selection procedure was used. The achieved sample represented 41.7% of the statistical population; however, this coverage rate does not substitute for the logic of probability sampling.

The questionnaire consisted of four demographic questions and 20 questions addressing the use of social media for news, types of pages followed, news sharing, trust, exposure to political and cultural news, political and cultural outcomes, fact-checking, and ranking of different types of news. Attitudinal items were measured using a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," whereas frequency items were measured on a scale ranging from "never" to "always."

The news exposure index was calculated as the mean of three components: use of Facebook as the primary source of daily news, level of exposure to political news, and level of exposure to cultural news. This index is composite in nature, and its components represent different dimensions of news exposure. The political behavior index was calculated as the mean of political awareness, political engagement, and public/political participation; the cultural behavior index was calculated as the mean of cultural awareness, cultural engagement, and changes in cultural interests or activities; and the overall index was calculated as the mean of the six outcome items.

The content validity of the instrument was assessed by five reviewers with expertise in media and communication studies. The overall reliability of the instrument was reported as Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$ during the pilot stage. In the final dataset, Cronbach's α was 0.812 for the six political and cultural behavior items, 0.760 for the three political items, and 0.730 for the three cultural items, indicating acceptable reliability for group-level analysis.

Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were initially calculated. Given the ordinal nature of most items and the nonexperimental study design, relationships among variables were tested using Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient. The Friedman test was used to compare the rankings of the four types of news, and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Holm correction were employed for pairwise comparisons. The significance level was set at 0.05. Inferential analyses were used to identify patterns among the 100 respondents rather than to provide definitive estimates of parameters for all university students in Iraq.

Before analysis, responses were checked for completeness, permissible coding ranges, and logical consistency. The final dataset consisted of 100 complete responses, with no missing data for variables used in hypothesis testing. Response-option coding was standardized before calculating the indices to ensure that the direction of the scale remained consistent across all items and that the resulting means were interpretable.

The political and cultural behavior index was constructed from six items coded in the same direction, and a Cronbach's α of 0.812 indicated satisfactory internal consistency. In contrast, the exposure index is formative in nature; its components combine different aspects of the news experience, namely the role of news as an information source and the salience of political and cultural news. Therefore, complete internal homogeneity among the exposure components is not expected, and Cronbach's α is not the primary criterion for evaluating this index.

In reporting the results, means were provided to summarize the general direction of responses; however, the primary statistical inference was based on rank-based tests. This approach prevents overstatement of the interval-level precision of Likert-type response options. Furthermore, because voluntary sampling was used, statistical significance was interpreted as evidence of patterns among the 100 respondents rather than as a precise estimate of population parameters for all university students in Iraq.

Data quality control also included distinguishing nominal variables from ordinal items. For gender, age, academic year, and place of residence, only frequencies and percentages were reported because calculating means for nominally coded variables



would not be meaningful. Although straightforward, this distinction is essential because it prevents administrative codes from being treated as continuous quantitative values in the analysis.

3. Findings and Results

In the sample of 100 respondents, frequencies and percentages are numerically identical. There were no missing data for the main study variables.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics and Daily Social Media Use (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	54	54.0
Gender	Female	46	46.0
Age	18–20 years	31	31.0
Age	21–23 years	27	27.0
Age	24–26 years	25	25.0
Age	27 years and older	17	17.0
Academic year	First year	15	15.0
Academic year	Second year	18	18.0
Academic year	Third year	33	33.0
Academic year	Fourth year	34	34.0
Place of residence	Within Nasiriyah	58	58.0
Place of residence	Outside Nasiriyah	42	42.0
Daily use	Less than 1 hour	29	29.0
Daily use	1–2 hours	17	17.0
Daily use	3–4 hours	26	26.0
Daily use	5–6 hours	13	13.0
Daily use	More than 6 hours	15	15.0

The gender composition of the sample was relatively balanced. A total of 58% of respondents lived within Nasiriyah. Daily usage patterns were heterogeneous: 29% used social media for less than one hour per day, whereas 28% used these platforms for five hours or more per day. Thirty-seven percent primarily followed a combination of local, national, and Arab/international pages; 40% regularly reshared news, while 34% did so occasionally. This distribution indicates that the sample did not consist exclusively of very heavy social media users.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Main Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
News exposure index	3.14	0.96	3.00
Exposure to political news	3.17	1.26	3.00
Exposure to cultural news	3.07	1.25	3.00
Political behavior index	3.31	0.95	3.33
Political and national awareness	3.43	1.06	3.50
Political engagement	3.12	1.17	3.00
Public/political participation	3.37	1.24	3.00
Cultural behavior index	3.33	0.97	3.33
Cultural awareness	3.29	1.23	3.50
Cultural engagement	3.35	1.16	3.00
Changes in cultural interests/activities	3.36	1.24	4.00
Overall political and cultural behavior index	3.32	0.85	3.42

The range of all items and indices was from 1 to 5; higher values indicate greater exposure or stronger reported outcomes.

The mean of the overall political and cultural behavior index was above the theoretical midpoint. Within the political domain, political awareness had the highest mean, whereas political engagement had the lowest. Within the cultural domain, the three outcomes were relatively similar, with changes in cultural interests or activities showing the highest mean. These differences do not, by themselves, demonstrate a relationship with exposure; correlation analysis is required for that purpose.

From a communication perspective, the mean news exposure score of 3.14 and the overall political and cultural behavior score of approximately 3.32 indicate that respondents' news-related experiences were at a moderate-to-high level. Nevertheless,



differences between the mean scores of the political and cultural dimensions were limited, and these descriptive indicators alone are insufficient to confirm the hypothesized relationships. Accordingly, evaluation of the hypotheses was based on rank-order correlation coefficients.

Table 3. Results of Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Analysis

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Spearman's Coefficient	<i>p</i>	Strength	Result
General hypothesis	News exposure	Political and cultural behavior	0.592	< 0.001	Positive, relatively strong	Supported
Political 1	Political news	Political and national awareness	0.494	< 0.001	Positive, moderate	Supported
Political 2	Political news	Political engagement	0.396	< 0.001	Positive, moderate	Supported
Political 3	Political news	Public/political participation	0.541	< 0.001	Positive, relatively strong	Supported
Cultural 1	Cultural news	Cultural awareness	0.362	< 0.001	Positive, moderate	Supported
Cultural 2	Cultural news	Cultural engagement	0.298	0.003	Positive, weak	Supported
Cultural 3	Cultural news	Changes in interests/activities	0.377	< 0.001	Positive, moderate	Supported

The strength of the relationships was interpreted with consideration of the research context, measurement scales, and sample size. Correlation does not imply causation.

General hypothesis: A statistically significant, positive, and relatively strong relationship was observed between the news exposure index and the overall political and cultural behavior index. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.592, with a significance level below 0.001. Therefore, the general hypothesis was supported.

Political Hypothesis 1: Exposure to political news had a positive and moderate relationship with political and national awareness. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.494, with a significance level below 0.001; therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Political Hypothesis 2: Exposure to political news had a positive and moderate relationship with political engagement. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.396, with a significance level below 0.001; therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Political Hypothesis 3: Exposure to political news had a positive and relatively strong relationship with public/political participation. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.541, with a significance level below 0.001. Therefore, the hypothesis was supported, and this coefficient represented the strongest relationship among the subsidiary hypotheses.

Cultural Hypothesis 1: Exposure to cultural news had a positive and moderate relationship with cultural awareness. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.362, with a significance level below 0.001; therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Cultural Hypothesis 2: Exposure to cultural news had a positive but weak relationship with cultural engagement. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.298, with a significance level of 0.003; therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Cultural Hypothesis 3: Exposure to cultural news had a positive and moderate relationship with the selection or modification of cultural interests and activities. Spearman's correlation coefficient was 0.377, with a significance level below 0.001; therefore, the hypothesis was supported.

Table 4. Mean Ranks of News Types and Results of the Friedman Test

News Type	Mean Rank	Rank
Cultural	2.12	1
Political	2.23	2
Social	2.61	3
Economic	3.04	4

Friedman test: $\chi^2(3) = 31.26, p < 0.001$; Kendall's $W = 0.104$. A lower rank indicates a higher priority.

Table 5. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Pairwise Comparisons With Holm Correction

Comparison	Wilcoxon Statistic	Adjusted <i>p</i>	Result
Political–Cultural	2368.5	0.576	Not significant
Political–Social	2059.5	0.204	Not significant
Political–Economic	1458.5	< 0.001	Significant



Cultural–Social	1658.0	0.008	Significant
Cultural–Economic	1185.5	< 0.001	Significant
Social–Economic	1694.0	0.008	Significant

The difference between political and cultural news was not statistically significant; therefore, these two domains should be interpreted as closely clustered at the highest level of priority.

Page | 9

The Friedman test revealed a statistically significant overall difference among the rankings of the four types of news, $\chi^2(3) = 31.26$, $p < 0.001$. However, Kendall's W was 0.104, indicating a small effect size. In pairwise comparisons with Holm correction, the political–cultural comparison ($p = 0.576$) and the political–social comparison ($p = 0.204$) were not statistically significant. In contrast, the political–economic comparison ($p < 0.001$), cultural–social comparison ($p = 0.008$), cultural–economic comparison ($p < 0.001$), and social–economic comparison ($p = 0.008$) were statistically significant. Accordingly, political and cultural news should be interpreted as forming a closely ranked priority cluster rather than as two completely distinct ranking positions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between exposure to news content through social media and the political and cultural behavior of students at the University of Dhi Qar. The findings showed that the overall news exposure index was positively and significantly associated with the combined political and cultural behavior index, with a Spearman correlation coefficient of 0.592 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a relatively strong relationship. In addition, exposure to political news was positively associated with political and national awareness ($r_s = 0.494$), political engagement ($r_s = 0.396$), and public/political participation ($r_s = 0.541$). Exposure to cultural news was likewise positively associated with cultural awareness ($r_s = 0.362$), cultural engagement ($r_s = 0.298$), and changes in cultural interests or activities ($r_s = 0.377$). The findings therefore indicate that students who reported greater exposure to news through social media also tended to report greater political and cultural awareness, engagement, participation, and behavioral change. The ranking analysis further revealed significant differences among political, cultural, social, and economic news preferences, although the effect size was small. Political and cultural news occupied closely ranked positions, whereas economic news received lower priority. Taken together, the results portray social media as an important communicative environment associated with multiple dimensions of students' public and cultural lives rather than merely as a passive channel for receiving information.

The significant positive relationship between the overall news exposure index and the combined political and cultural behavior index can be explained through the increasingly integrated role of social media within contemporary communication systems. Social media platforms bring together professional journalism, interpersonal communication, public commentary, political messaging, cultural expression, and user participation within the same technological environment. This pattern is compatible with Chadwick's concept of the hybrid media system, in which older and newer media logics interact and shape flows of political information, influence, and participation (Chadwick, 2017). Students who frequently encounter news on social media are therefore exposed not only to information itself but also to comments, interpretations, reactions, debates, and calls for participation surrounding that information. Similarly, network media logic emphasizes connectivity, sharing, personalization, and circulation as central characteristics of contemporary political communication (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). These characteristics can help explain why exposure was related not only to awareness but also to engagement and participation in the present study. News distributed through social media is embedded within interactive networks, making exposure more likely to be accompanied by discussion, sharing, evaluation, and behavioral response.

The positive association between political news exposure and political and national awareness was one of the clearest findings of the study. Students who reported greater exposure to political news also tended to report higher political awareness. This finding is consistent with research among Iraqi university students showing that social media networks can play a meaningful role in disseminating political information and strengthening political awareness (Hussein, 2024). The result is also theoretically consistent with agenda-setting research, which proposes that repeated media attention to particular issues contributes to their perceived importance among audiences (McCombs, 2005). When political issues are repeatedly encountered through Facebook or other social platforms, students may become more familiar with governmental decisions,



political events, national debates, public controversies, and competing interpretations of current affairs. Even when exposure does not produce detailed political knowledge, it can increase issue salience and stimulate further information seeking. The observed moderate coefficient therefore appears plausible because awareness is likely to reflect not only frequency of exposure but also preexisting political interest, educational background, source credibility, and willingness to process political information.

The relationship between exposure to political news and political engagement was also positive and statistically significant, although its magnitude was lower than the relationship with political awareness and participation. This finding suggests that encountering political news is associated with increased discussion, interaction, or communicative involvement, but that exposure alone may not translate uniformly into active engagement. This pattern corresponds with research on high-choice media environments showing that greater access to political information creates opportunities for engagement while simultaneously allowing users to avoid, selectively choose, or superficially consume political material (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The availability of news is therefore not equivalent to active political involvement. Students may scroll through political news or monitor current events without commenting, debating, or joining discussions. At the same time, social media lower the practical barriers to engagement by making it possible to react, comment, share, and discuss political issues immediately. The moderate relationship found in the present study therefore supports the view that social media provide an enabling communication infrastructure for political engagement, while individual motivations and communication preferences remain important determinants of whether exposure develops into active interaction.

The relatively strong relationship between political news exposure and public/political participation was particularly noteworthy and represented the strongest association among the specific political and cultural hypotheses. This finding aligns closely with Hussein's evidence that political awareness generated through social media is related to the activation of political participation among Iraqi university students (Hussein, 2024). Social media may facilitate participation because they reduce the distance between information acquisition and behavioral response. A student who encounters political news can immediately share the information, express a position, join a discussion, follow a campaign, or participate in digitally mediated public activities. Trust may also condition this process. Fletcher and Park showed that trust in news media is related to patterns of online news consumption and participation, suggesting that the perceived credibility of information can affect whether audiences act upon what they encounter (Fletcher & Park, 2017). At the same time, the relationship observed in the present study should not be interpreted causally. Politically active students may deliberately seek more political news, creating reciprocal reinforcement between news exposure and participation.

The broader Iraqi information environment may also help explain the political findings. Iraqi social media spaces are highly active but also characterized by contestation, polarization, misinformation, and organized forms of online pressure. Research on networked trolling targeting critical journalists and news organizations in Iraq shows that political communication on social platforms can involve coordinated hostility and strategic attempts to shape discourse (Al-Rawi et al., 2023). Similarly, studies of misinformation among Iraqi students demonstrate that social media can simultaneously function as a source of public information and an environment for the circulation of inaccurate or conspiratorial claims (Numan, 2023). These conditions mean that increased political exposure does not necessarily represent exposure to uniformly high-quality information. Instead, students are operating in a complex information environment in which credible reporting, partisan interpretations, disinformation, and public reactions may coexist. The present findings thus indicate an association between exposure and political behavior but should be interpreted alongside the quality and credibility of the information encountered.

The importance of credibility is further reinforced by the literature on media trust and online information assessment. Kohring and Matthes conceptualized trust in news media as a multidimensional judgment concerning the selection, accuracy, and assessment of news information (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). In online environments, such judgments become more difficult because users encounter information from professional media, government sources, political groups, acquaintances, influencers, and anonymous accounts within the same feed. Metzger and Flanagin emphasized that users often employ cognitive heuristics to evaluate online credibility when systematic assessment is difficult (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Moreover, skepticism does not necessarily eliminate exposure; users may continue consuming information from sources they do not fully trust (Tsftati & Cappella, 2003). These insights are relevant to the current findings because students may remain highly exposed



to political news even in circumstances of uncertainty about credibility. Thus, the positive relationship between exposure and political behavior does not automatically imply that all political effects are informed by verified or high-quality information.

The finding that exposure to cultural news was positively associated with cultural awareness is also consistent with previous research on social media and cultural identity. Ghahremani and colleagues showed that virtual social networks contribute to processes affecting changes in students' cultural identity, indicating that online environments can shape how young people encounter, interpret, and negotiate cultural values and orientations (Ghahremani et al., 2024). Likewise, Latifi and colleagues identified multiple factors through which participation in platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram can affect students' cultural identity (Latifi et al., 2021). The positive correlation between cultural news exposure and cultural awareness in the present study can therefore be understood as part of a broader process through which digital communication expands contact with cultural events, traditions, social practices, artistic activities, and identity-related narratives. Repeated exposure may increase familiarity with cultural issues and provide students with reference points for interpreting both local and wider cultural developments.

The positive but relatively weak relationship between cultural news exposure and cultural engagement suggests that increased cultural awareness does not always produce equivalent levels of active cultural interaction. Cultural engagement may require more than receiving information; it may depend on personal interest, peer networks, access to cultural institutions, time, financial resources, and the perceived relevance of particular cultural activities. Nevertheless, the significant association indicates that social media may still function as an important gateway to cultural interaction. Digital environments allow students to discuss cultural content, join online communities, follow cultural events, exchange opinions, and discover activities that might otherwise remain outside their immediate social environment. The result is compatible with the argument that virtual social networks create spaces in which cultural identity and participation are continuously reconstructed through interaction with diverse forms of content (Ghahremani et al., 2024; Latifi et al., 2021). The weaker coefficient may reflect the greater distance between exposure and active cultural involvement compared with awareness.

The positive relationship between cultural news exposure and changes in cultural interests or activities is especially relevant to understanding social media as an agent of cultural adaptation. Students who encounter more cultural news may discover new cultural practices, events, artistic forms, social traditions, or identity narratives that influence their preferences and activities. Previous research has associated the quality of virtual social network use with national identity, indicating that digital communication can shape individuals' relationship with collective cultural belonging (Heydari et al., 2021). More specifically, research conducted among students at the University of Dhi Qar has indicated that social media platforms can contribute to strengthening national identity (Duhairish & Abdulrahman, 2025). The present finding complements this local evidence by suggesting that the cultural role of social media extends beyond national identity to students' broader cultural awareness, engagement, and changing interests. Social media may therefore operate simultaneously as a mechanism of cultural continuity and cultural diversification, exposing students both to national cultural narratives and to wider regional or global cultural influences.

The significant overall relationship between news exposure and political-cultural behavior may also be interpreted through transformations in the digital public sphere. Habermas has argued that digitalization has contributed to a further structural transformation of the political public sphere, creating new opportunities for participation while also producing fragmentation and challenges to shared public communication (Habermas, 2022). The findings of the present study reflect this dual potential. Social media appear to be associated with greater awareness and participation, but these benefits arise within platforms whose structures also encourage selective exposure, fragmented attention, and variable information quality. Fuchs similarly emphasizes that social media platforms are not neutral channels; their economic and technological structures influence visibility, communication, and power relations (Fuchs, 2021). Therefore, the association observed in this study should be viewed not simply as an effect of individual media use but as part of a larger communication environment structured by algorithms, platform design, user networks, and commercial priorities.

Selective exposure is another mechanism that may help explain the results. Bakshy and colleagues demonstrated that exposure to ideologically diverse content on Facebook is shaped jointly by platform algorithms and users' own choices (Bakshy et al., 2015). Consequently, students with stronger political or cultural interests may be more likely to follow relevant pages, interact with particular content, and subsequently receive additional similar material. This creates a potential feedback

loop in which interest increases exposure and exposure further strengthens awareness or behavior. Such reciprocal dynamics may partly account for the relatively strong overall association found in the present research. They also reinforce the need to avoid causal interpretations because the cross-sectional design cannot determine whether exposure preceded behavioral differences or whether students' existing political and cultural orientations shaped their patterns of news consumption.

The results regarding the ranking of news types provide an additional perspective on students' informational priorities. The Friedman test showed significant differences among cultural, political, social, and economic news, although Kendall's W of 0.104 indicated that the magnitude of these differences was small. Cultural and political news received the highest mean priorities and did not differ significantly from one another. Political and social news were also not significantly different, whereas economic news was ranked significantly below several other categories. These findings suggest that students' news interests are relatively clustered rather than sharply separated. In a high-choice media environment, audiences can personalize their information diets and distribute attention across multiple topics (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The close positioning of political and cultural news may reflect the fact that both domains are strongly connected to students' immediate experiences of society, identity, national affairs, and public debate. Because the participants were students in a College of Media, their academic orientation may also make them particularly attentive to public and cultural issues.

The ranking findings can additionally be understood from an agenda-setting perspective. Media exposure does not merely determine whether individuals encounter information; it contributes to perceptions of which topics deserve greater attention (McCombs, 2005). Social media intensify this process because the prominence of particular topics is produced by the interaction of editorial selection, user sharing, algorithmic recommendation, and network visibility. Political and cultural topics may therefore become salient when they are repeatedly circulated within students' networks. However, the small effect size indicates that the hierarchy of preferences was not pronounced. This suggests that students maintained relatively diverse news interests rather than focusing overwhelmingly on a single category. Such diversity may be beneficial for developing a broader understanding of public affairs, although the quality of information remains a critical concern.

The role of news literacy is therefore central to the interpretation of all of these results. Vraga and colleagues emphasized that news literacy involves behaviors through which individuals critically evaluate, verify, and appropriately engage with news content (Vraga et al., 2021). Given the demonstrated relationships between news exposure and political and cultural outcomes, greater exposure potentially increases both opportunities and risks. Students who possess strong news literacy may use social media to expand political knowledge, discover cultural information, participate in constructive discussion, and verify questionable claims. Conversely, greater exposure without adequate evaluative skills may increase vulnerability to misinformation, manipulation, or emotionally charged content. This concern is supported by evidence from Iraq showing that social media exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with panic and heightened public concern (Ahmad & Murad, 2020), as well as by findings regarding misinformation among Iraqi students (Numan, 2023). Thus, the educational significance of the present findings lies not merely in encouraging news exposure but in promoting informed, critical, and responsible engagement with digital news.

Overall, the findings support the view that social media have become a consequential component of the informational environment of University of Dhi Qar students. The positive associations observed across political awareness, political engagement, public/political participation, cultural awareness, cultural engagement, and changes in cultural interests suggest that digital news exposure is interconnected with several dimensions of student behavior. These findings are broadly consistent with theoretical approaches emphasizing agenda-setting, hybrid media systems, network media logic, high-choice environments, trust, credibility, news literacy, and transformations of the public sphere (Chadwick, 2017; Habermas, 2022; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; McCombs, 2005; Van Aelst et al., 2017). They are also supported by empirical studies demonstrating associations between social media and political awareness, participation, national identity, cultural identity, misinformation, and public response in Iraqi and comparable contexts (Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Al-Rawi et al., 2023; Duhairish & Abdulrahman, 2025; Ghahremani et al., 2024; Heydari et al., 2021; Hussein, 2024; Latifi et al., 2021). At the same time, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of patterned relationships rather than causal effects, because students' preexisting interests, attitudes, media preferences, and social environments may simultaneously shape both news exposure and reported political or cultural behavior.



The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not permit determination of temporal order or causal relationships between news exposure and political or cultural behavior. It is therefore possible that greater news exposure contributes to awareness and participation, but it is equally possible that students who are already more politically or culturally engaged intentionally seek more news. Second, the use of non-probability voluntary self-selection sampling may have produced selection bias, as students who were more interested in social media, news, politics, or cultural issues may have been more willing to complete the questionnaire. Third, the sample was restricted to 100 students from the College of Media at the University of Dhi Qar, limiting the generalizability of the findings to students from other colleges, universities, regions, or age groups in Iraq. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be affected by recall error, social desirability, and differences in respondents' interpretations of frequency and behavioral items. Fifth, the news exposure index combined several conceptually distinct components and did not directly measure the amount, duration, ideological diversity, source quality, or algorithmic characteristics of exposure. Finally, the study did not distinguish between different social media platforms, types of political participation, or specific forms of cultural activity, which may conceal important variation within the observed relationships.

Future studies should employ longitudinal or panel designs to examine whether changes in digital news exposure precede changes in political and cultural behavior and to clarify reciprocal relationships between media use and engagement. Probability sampling across multiple Iraqi universities and academic disciplines would improve representativeness and permit comparisons across geographic regions, educational backgrounds, and demographic groups. Future research could also distinguish between major social media platforms and examine how their different technological affordances, recommendation systems, and interaction structures influence political and cultural outcomes. More detailed measures of news exposure should assess frequency, duration, content type, source diversity, ideological diversity, credibility, accidental versus intentional exposure, and the extent of active engagement with news. Structural equation modeling could be used to investigate mediating variables such as political interest, media trust, news literacy, perceived credibility, national identity, and interpersonal discussion. Qualitative interviews or focus groups would also be valuable for understanding how students interpret political and cultural news and how they perceive its influence on their attitudes and activities. Finally, experimental studies could investigate how exposure to verified, misleading, partisan, or culturally diverse content affects awareness, trust, participation intentions, and cultural preferences.

Universities, media faculties, student organizations, and communication professionals should use the findings to strengthen students' capacity for informed and responsible engagement with social media news. Media and news literacy training should be incorporated into academic programs, with emphasis on source evaluation, fact-checking, recognition of misinformation, identification of persuasive techniques, and responsible sharing practices. Universities could establish workshops, digital verification laboratories, student media initiatives, and moderated forums where students critically discuss political and cultural news. Faculty members should encourage students to compare information from multiple credible sources rather than relying on single social media feeds or viral posts. Student affairs departments can also use digital platforms to promote constructive civic and cultural participation by circulating verified information about public initiatives, cultural events, community activities, and opportunities for dialogue. At the same time, institutional communication strategies should avoid equating greater exposure with better information; the primary objective should be to improve the quality, diversity, and critical interpretation of the news students encounter.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.



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