

Women, Social Media and Political Engagement in Japan: A Survey Study

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Abstract

Despite comparable levels of political participation between genders, a significant gender gap in political empowerment persists in Japan. Women demonstrate a tendency towards progressive perspectives, yet exhibit lower levels of political interest and knowledge. The advent of social media has given rise to a plethora of discourse surrounding its impact, particularly in relation to women's political engagement. Drawing on a survey of 1,723 respondents, this study examines gendered patterns in social media use and political engagement in Japan. Findings reveal that while Japanese women are active on Instagram, they seldom engage in political activities on the platform – unlike men, who are more likely to use social media for political purposes. Nevertheless, social media discussions can occasionally shift toward political topics, potentially heightening gender consciousness among women. This unexpected form of political communication, occurring within intimate online spaces, raises questions about its potential to foster political empowerment for Japanese women in the future.

Keywords: Japan, social media, gendered social media use, political participation, women, gender gap, Instagram

Introduction

Political participation is crucial for a democracy – it “provides the mechanism by which citizens can communicate information about their interests, preferences, and needs and generate pressure to respond” (Verba et al. 1995: 1; see also Hoffman 2012). More recently, political empowerment, including the equal representation of women, has been seen as another condition for a healthy democracy (Stawell 1907, Tremblay 2007, Celis / Childs 2023). A state in which

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women have the right to vote and stand for election, and in which women occupy the same number of parliamentary seats as men, is considered to be more democratic than one in which men occupy the majority of seats. Political participation and political empowerment are linked, as the former should lead to the latter. According to liberal theory, media such as the printed press, radio and television have played an essential role in the political empowerment of citizens, as they have allowed them to gain direct knowledge of the behaviour of the political and other elites who govern their societies (Savigny 2013). Social media¹ is the latest form of citizen voice, as it is characterised by openness and widespread engagement (Gerodimos et al. 2013).

Japan is known as a democratic state with strong institutions, regular elections and a reasonably free press. However, there is a huge gap between men and women in terms of political empowerment, particularly in terms of representation, rendering Japan “a democracy without women” (Maeda 2019). Based on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, which is an indicator of countries’ progress towards gender parity in four key areas (economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, political empowerment), Japan ranked 125th out of 146 countries in 2023 (World Economic Forum 2023). The report highlights the country’s poor performance in politics and the economy, especially in economic participation (123rd) and political empowerment (138th), as measured by the share of women in parliament (10 per cent), women in ministerial positions (8.3 per cent) and number of years with a female head of state (zero in the last 50 years).

Against this background, there has been a renewed focus on women’s political participation in Japan, especially online, as the rise of the internet has changed the nature of political engagement among citizens and marginalised groups, including women, ethnic minorities and youth. Japanese media have reported on women’s enthusiastic participation in online political activities, some of which have led to successful public actions (The Mainichi 2019, Human Rights Now 2018). However, there seems to be little consensus on how political participation and social media use align in Japan, particularly with regard to gender differences.

Incorporating a gender perspective necessitates an understanding of the specific political activities in which Japanese citizens engage, particularly online. Moreover, exploring how Japanese citizens access political information is crucial. An analysis of potential disparities in online political engagement based on gender could provide valuable insights into Japan’s political landscape. The analysis described in this article is based on original data obtained from a

1 In this paper, we adopt the definition of social media as “web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible” (McCay-Peet / Quan-Haase 2017: 17).

multiple-choice online survey conducted in September 2022. The timing was immediately after the 2022 House of Councillors Election, as we assumed that many voters would have been exposed to political information during the election campaign. The samples were obtained from responses to a research company's monitor, consisting of Japanese citizens aged 18 to 79. A total of 1,723 samples were collected (910 men, 808 women, and 5 individuals identified as "other"). Respondents were divided into 13 regional blocks, gender, and age in 10-year increments to reflect the gender and demographic composition of Japan. The survey included thirty-five questions about social media use, the types of posts or information respondents see, write or share on the internet or social media, and their political attitudes and voting behaviour, including the influence of the media (see Appendix 1 for the translated original survey questions). We also asked about the respondents' attitudes towards women-friendly policies. This was an important indicator to help understand the political attitudes of Japanese citizens, as political participation is generally low in Japan. The survey data is original and has not been used as the basis for any other publications.

Analysis of the survey material demonstrates that, among many findings, characteristics of social media usage are gendered in Japan, with more men than women using social media for political participation and communication. Among the identified gendered differences, we found that a greater number of women than men actively use Instagram, but they rarely do so for political purposes. Nevertheless, Instagram appears to evoke and heighten gender consciousness among its users. As discussions occur within more intimate social media platforms like Instagram, the content being communicated can unexpectedly transition into the realm of politics, even if the participants initially had no intention of engaging in political discourse. Whether this form of serpentine political communication among women in Japan ultimately leads to political empowerment remains to be seen.

Political participation and social media

Political participation, the activity of private citizens aimed at influencing government decision-making, is crucial for a healthy democracy and can take various forms (Huntington / Nelson 1976). For example, Dalton identified six general types of political action: voting, campaigning, contacting officials directly, community activity (working with a group in the community), protest and other forms of contentious politics, and internet activism (visiting websites, sending emails, posting online) (Dalton 2020). Citizens' political participation promotes compromise, cooperation, consideration of different policy options, and increases

the legitimacy of the decision-making process, thereby empowering the citizens themselves (Kim 2010).

The advent of the internet made traditional political activities easier while also creating new political opportunities, such as online petitions and online political contributions (Jensen et al. 2012). Among the services available on the internet, social media has become the most recent addition to the venues where citizens can express their voice and engage in such traditional political activities as connecting with others, gathering and sharing information, and attempting to influence the political process (Gerodimos et al. 2013). The various forms of social media have an open, highly interactive nature and therefore play a unique role in bringing together like-minded people in a community or virtual community (Dalton 2020).

The media in general are crucial in setting the agenda and framing the discourse on any particular issue. Modern media and communication, with their meanings and practices of democracy, constitute a “public sphere”, which can be understood as types of processes that have social, institutional and organisational conditions of possibility in which public deliberation takes place (Barnett 2004: 188). In recent years, a growing number of researchers have drawn attention to the political significance of conversations about topics such as sports, crime, entertainment, culture, parenting, medicine, science, technology, and even the weather (Boczkowski / Mitchelstein 2010, Rowe 2017). Siles and Tristán-Jiménez (2020) examined comments on ostensibly non-political news published by Costa Rican news organisations on Facebook that turned into a discussion about politics. Some see social media as a “third space”, an online space that is formally apolitical but where political debates emerge (Wright 2020, 2014).

Hoffman (2012) described online political participation as “an information-rich activity that utilizes new media technology and is intended to affect, either directly or indirectly, policy-makers, candidates, or public officials” and argued that political activity observed online can be better characterised as political communication than participation. Online political communication was defined as “a relational process using new media to communicate synchronously or asynchronously, across one, two, or three dimensions” (Hoffman 2012: 222), and such behaviour tends to send less obvious messages to the government than actual participation.

While some of the existing research on political participation and social media is positive about this new phenomenon, other researchers are increasingly aware of its long-term impact on civic life, which may entail negative as well as positive consequences (Chadwick 2020: 2). Indeed, although social media has played a significant role in bringing rights issues to the attention of a wider public (Loiseau / Nawacka 2015), women and minority groups tend to be underrepresented in digital media, just as they are in traditional media (UN Women 2020).

This underrepresentation may contribute to the pressure on female political candidates to adopt stereotypically masculine behaviours in order to gain influence on Twitter (now X; Wagner et al. 2017). They tweet more than men about women, but also need to demonstrate awareness of other issues that male representatives focus on, such as business issues (Evans 2016). In tweets directed at politicians, female politicians are remarkably more likely than male politicians to be reduced to their gender rather than their profession, often receiving gendered insults (Mertens et al. 2019, Beltran et al. 2021). While there seems to be no consensus on the exact nature of the relationship between political participation and social media, there is general agreement that social media plays an important role in citizens' political participation and political empowerment.

How is this reflected in Japan? Although there was a time in Japan when women voted more than men, today men vote slightly more than women. Men are also more active in forms of participation other than voting (Kabashima / Sakaiya 2020). In recent years, however, Japanese media have reported that Japanese women's political participation is vibrant – particularly online – and has successfully led to public action. Successful campaigns using hashtag activism in the Japanese language environment are often cited as examples. The #MeToo movement in Japan led to a nationwide grassroots movement called the “Flower Demo”, which eventually resulted in revisions of the national penal code on sexual violence (Hasunuma / Shin 2019, Miura 2021). Another success was the #KuToo movement, started by a Japanese actress, freelance writer and part-time funeral parlour worker, which called for an end to the social convention whereby many Japanese companies require their female employees to wear 5-to- 7 cm heels or pumps (Rachelle 2019). The campaign convinced major Japanese companies, such as Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways, to change their company rules to allow female employees to wear shoes without heels.

New political parties have also emerged that are more adept at online campaigning and have clear social media strategies. The NHK Party (Seijika Joshi [Politician Girls] 48 Party at the time of writing) and the Party of Do It Yourself (PDIY) are very active on social media such as YouTube and Twitter, and they aim to appeal to female voters. The NHK Party and PDIY were only established in 2019 and 2020 respectively, but each party managed to win one seat in the 2022 Japanese House of Councillors election. These electoral gains reflect broader trends in political engagement in Japan, where various modes of participation have been analysed in recent studies.

Kabashima and Sakaiya (2020) categorised Japanese citizens' modes of political participation into 1) traditional participation other than voting, 2) voting, 3) online political expression, 4) protests and 5) offline political expression, based on survey data analysis. Notably, political expression on the internet

showed a very weak correlation with other forms of political participation. This suggests that individuals who participate in online political expression may have distinct characteristics from those involved in other types of political participation. Given this, understanding how Japanese voters, especially women, engage in political activities, particularly online, is crucial. By exploring these questions, this paper aims to shed light on the nuances of online political engagement among Japanese voters. Specifically, it seeks to understand how social media facilitates access to political information and whether patterns of engagement – defined here, following Gerodimos et.al (2013, as connecting with others, gathering and sharing information, and attempting to influence the political process – differ by gender. This focus on gendered differences may reveal broader implications for political participation trends and digital engagement in Japan.

Results and analysis

Social media usage: Frequency and purposes

First, this analysis examines gender differences in the frequency of social media use. The focus is on Twitter (now X), Facebook and Instagram as typical social media, along with Yahoo! Comments and bulletin board systems (BBS, such as 2channel, 5channel, Bakusai and GirlsChannel), which are commonly used for political communication in Japan. Yahoo! Comments, attached to the news section of Yahoo! Japan, allows users to post anonymous comments on news articles. This selection of platforms is informed by a social media exposure survey commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MRI 2022).

In our survey, we asked respondents about their experience of using eleven social media services in the past year, as well as several open-ended questions (Q2 in the Appendix). We also asked those who had used any of the services how often they used them (Q3). Figure 1 shows the percentage of those who had used them daily or sometimes. Age is strongly related to social media use and is therefore taken into account together with gender.

Overall, Twitter use is higher among young and middle-aged people, followed by Instagram. There is a clear gender difference in the use of Instagram among young and middle-aged people: among 18–39-year-olds, 72.0 per cent of women use Instagram compared to 44.2 per cent of men, and among 40–59-year-olds, 44.6 per cent of women use Instagram compared to 28.6 per cent of men. Other trends are less pronounced, although there is a tendency for middle-aged and older men to use Facebook and bulletin boards more frequently.

Figure 1: Frequency of social media use by age and gender

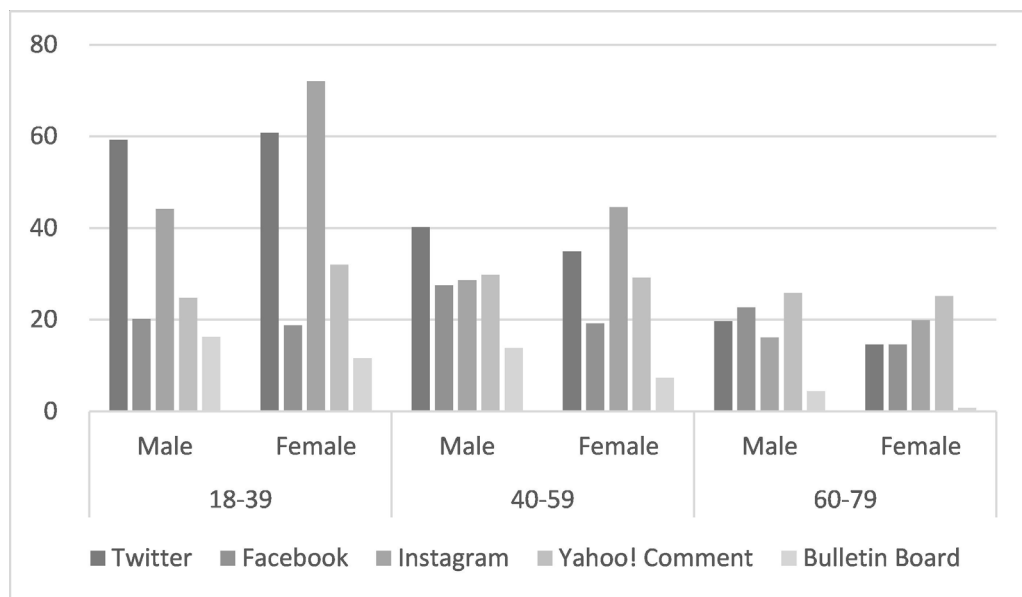


Table 1: Purpose of social media usage (in %)

	18-39			40-59			60-79			Total
	Male	Female	χ^2	Male	Female	χ^2	Male	Female	χ^2	
Communication with friends, acquaintances and family	43,8	54,8	6,15 *	34,3	44,6	7,34 **	39,8	50,0	5,69 *	43,78
Business communication	21,7	16,8	1,96	15,9	17,0	0,15	11,7	6,5	4,31 *	14,94
Gathering information on hobbies, etc.	62,8	68,8	2,04	53,5	59,3	2,23	43,8	40,2	0,70	54,6
Gathering information on political and social issues	23,6	17,2	3,24	27,8	19,6	6,14 *	31,4	22,3	5,60 *	23,97
Speaking out on political and social issues	7,3	3,6	4,38 *	6,8	1,3	12,40 **	4,7	3,3	0,71	4,52
Gathering information on entertainment, sports, etc.	30,2	32,0	0,19	28,3	30,1	0,26	25,4	20,3	1,97	27,68
Posting photos, videos, etc. for people to see	17,8	27,6	6,92 **	10,5	11,2	0,09	7,0	5,3	0,70	12,85
Recording of one's activities	22,1	32,8	7,32 **	14,7	15,7	0,12	9,0	4,5	4,32 *	16,16
N	258	250		353	312		299	246	1727	

*: p<.05 **: p<.01
missing values were excluded

Source: Compiled by the author

Table 1 shows the purpose of social media use by age and gender. Our respondents were asked about their main purpose(s) in using social media (Q5) (multiple answers were possible), with the table showing the percentage of respondents who chose each purpose. The most common purpose overall was to get information about hobbies, followed by communicating with friends, acquaintances and family, and gathering information about entertainment and sports. This shows that respondents use social media mainly for private communication.

This tendency seems to be particularly true for women, who are more likely than men to use social media to communicate with friends, acquaintances and

family, and the results of the Chi-square test² are statistically significant for all age groups. Among younger age groups, women are more likely than men to post photos and videos and to keep a record of themselves. In contrast, men are more likely to gather information and comment on political and social issues, although some of these data are not statistically significant.

Table 2: Social topics viewed on social media: Sometimes or more (in %)

	18-39			40-59			60-79			Total
	Male	Female	χ^2	Male	Female	χ^2	Male	Female	χ^2	
Employment and working conditions	54,1	44,2	4,97 *	32,6	33,7	0,09	24,8	22,0	0,6	34,8
Economy and consumer prices	63,0	50,2	8,49 **	55,5	48,1	3,68	57,5	50,0	3,08	54,1
International relations and wars	61,5	44,6	14,5 **	56,4	45,8	7,37 **	65,9	54,1	7,9 **	54,9
Childcare and education	45,1	61,5	13,51 **	27,8	36,5	5,87 *	22,1	27,6	2,26	36,0
Healthcare, welfare and care	44,0	52,6	3,78	38,8	51,0	9,90 **	48,2	59,8	7,29 **	48,4
COVID-19 infections	54,5	61,5	2,52	53,2	62,5	5,79 *	62,2	65,5	0,612	59,6
Women's rights and gender discrimination	31,5	40,2	4,11 *	21,5	33,0	11,10 **	30,4	38,2	3,64	31,8
Political scandals	47,1	37,4	4,91 *	46,2	38,5	4,03 *	57,5	49,2	3,77	46,0
N	258	250		353	312		299	246		1723

*: $p < .05$ **: $p < .01$
missing values were excluded

Source: Compiled by the author

Table 2 shows the social topics viewed on social media by age and gender,³ showing the proportion of responses above the median of “sometimes” on a five-point scale (Q6). Overall, the most common topics are COVID-19 infection, international relations and wars, and the economy and consumer prices. The biggest gender differences are in international relations/war and political scandals, which are viewed by a higher proportion of men, regardless of age. Younger people view economic issues such as employment and working conditions, the economy and commodity prices. On the other hand, women in all age groups are more likely to look at issues such as childcare and education, health, welfare and care, COVID-19 infections and women’s rights and gender discrimination, although some of these issues are not statistically significant. It is safe to say that women are more likely than men to prefer viewing issues, whether actively or passively, that are more relevant to their own lives.

Taken together, an analysis of the questions on the frequency and purpose of social media use reveals gendered characteristics with regard to social media. More women than men use Instagram and also use social media as a private tool to communicate with friends and family. They are also more likely to see topics related to their daily lives, such as education and healthcare. In con-

2 The Chi-square test is a hypothesis testing method that measures how a model compares with actual observed data.

3 It is not clear from the question whether a respondent actively sought out a particular topic or whether it was simply fed to them. We acknowledge that this may limit our analysis, but the information is sufficient to capture the type of information the respondent is exposed to on a daily basis.

trast, men are relatively more likely to use social media to communicate about social and political issues and to see posts related to international relations and the economy. This suggests that, although social media use has become more widespread in Japan, it is generally men rather than women who use social media for political engagement, and this gender gap appears to be wider among the younger cohorts, which could imply that it will increase over time.

Social awareness and attitudes towards women-related issues

Private use of social media sites is more common among women than men, and it is plausible that this type of communication can raise awareness of political and social issues. For instance, discussions on topics such as childcare, education, social welfare and the treatment of women may increase awareness of these social issues among participants. To test this assumption, this study will examine the relationship between social media use and political and social attitudes, with a particular focus on issues related to women.

We conducted a factor analysis on seven opinion items regarding attitudes toward women, using a five-point scale. Table 3 displays the factor loadings after promax rotation⁴ for the three factors selected based on eigenvalues of 1 or higher.

Table 3: Factor analysis of attitudes toward women-related issues

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
Quota system	0,346	0,749	0,136	0,301
Men are more politically oriented	0,194	-0,168	0,580	0,598
When work opportunities are limited, jobs should go to men rather than women	0,200	-0,205	0,710	0,414
Sometimes it is necessary for women to stop working, for their sake of their families	0,104	-0,185	0,530	0,674
A certain percentage of leadership in many organizations should be assigned to women	0,334	0,682	0,174	0,393
Women legislators are an accurate representation of women's voices	1,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
Women's organizations and the women's movement are an accurate representation of women's voices	0,699	0,212	0,040	0,465
Eigenvalue	1,809	1,175	1,172	
Proportion	0,435	0,283	0,282	

extract eigenvalues were 1 or higher
factor loadings were Promax rotated

Source: Compiled by the author

Factor 1 has a high factor loading on the opinions that women legislators, women's organisations and the women's movement accurately represent the voices of women. This factor is considered to represent "representativeness of women's advocates". Factor 2 has a high factor loading on the opinions calling for a quota system and the allocation of women leaders in the organisation. We have therefore named it "allocation of female leaders". Factor 3 has high

4 Promax rotation, commonly used in social statistics, is a method that allows factors to correlate, enhancing interpretability of underlying patterns in survey data. Factors represent latent variables, derived from observed items, that capture underlying themes.

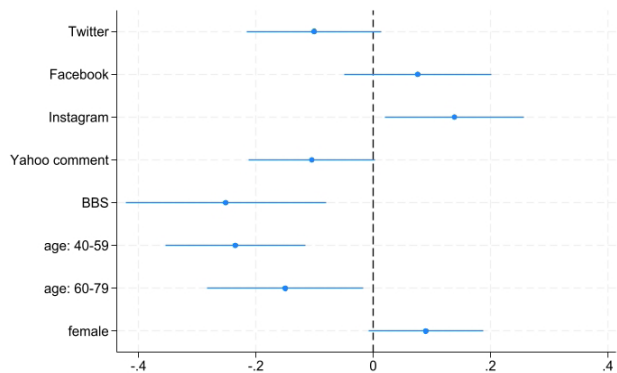
factor loadings on the opinions that “men are more politically oriented”, “When work opportunities are limited, jobs should go to men rather than women” and “sometimes it is necessary for women to stop working, for their sake of their families”. This represents a “gendered division of labour”, with men in the public domain and women in the private sphere.

We will explore the relationship between these factors of social attitudes towards women and gender, age and use of each example of social media. Figures 2–4 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis of the OLS estimation⁵ with each factor score as the dependent variable. Although each analysis has low coefficients of determination (R^2) and is not a sufficient set of explanatory factors, the focus here is on whether social media use has an effect.

Despite the limitations in explanatory power, the analysis reveals notable insights, particularly regarding the impact of specific social media platforms on attitudes. Instagram has a positive and statistically significant effect on opinions toward “representativeness of women’s advocates” among social media platforms. This suggests that increased use of Instagram is associated with a more favourable belief that female legislators and women’s organisations and movements represent women’s

voices. In contrast, BBS displays a negative and statistically significant effect, indicating that BBS users perceive that women’s voices are not adequately represented by female advocates. The coefficients for the middle-aged and older age groups are negative when compared to the younger age group, signifying that the younger age group tends to have a more favourable perception of the representativeness of

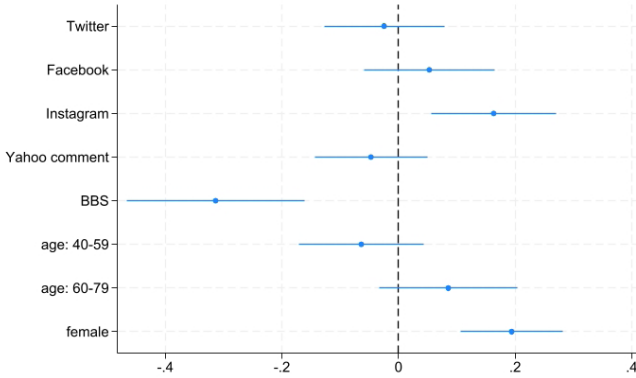
Figure 2: Multiple regression analysis with representativeness of women’s advocates as dependent variable (adjusted $R^2=0.026$)



women’s advocates. It is important to note that gender has no direct influence on these results. There is a positive effect of Instagram and a negative effect of BBS on opinions toward the allocation of female leaders. In other words, the more people use Instagram, the more they want the allocation of female leaders. On the other hand, when respondents use BBS more often, they do not desire the allocation of female leaders. Gender is positively significant, with women

⁵ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation is a regression technique that predicts a dependent variable by minimising differences between observed and predicted values. When factor scores are used as dependent variables in OLS, researchers can analyse how predictors influence these latent themes.

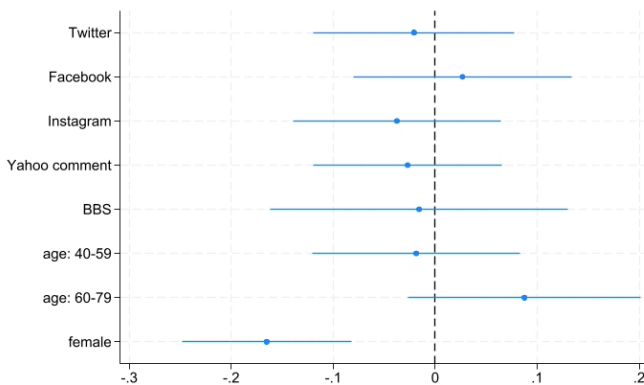
Figure 3: Multiple regression analysis with allocation of female leaders as dependent variable (adjusted R²=0.034)



wanting to see more female leaders. We found no effect of age. Furthermore, there is no clear effect of different social media use on attitudes toward gender roles. There is also no effect of age; only gender has a negative effect. In other words, women are more critical towards gender roles than men are.

Based on the findings presented above, it is evident that two social media platforms, Instagram and BBS, have varying degrees of association with societal attitudes towards women. In particular, there is a positive correlation between Instagram usage and attitudes towards female representation and the assignment of female leaders. Individuals who use Instagram more frequently tend to have more positive attitudes towards these issues. Given that women are more likely to use Instagram, this platform may have contributed to their increased awareness of women’s issues. BBS, on the other hand, is more commonly used by men and may be associated with more conservative attitudes towards women’s issues.

Figure 4: Multiple regression analysis with gender role as dependent variable (adjusted R²=0.010)



Political awareness and attitudes towards political parties

Building on the connection between social attitudes towards women and platform use, we now turn to examine how these attitudes intersect with political awareness and party perceptions.⁶ To do this, we use a scale that rates attitudes towards each political party in the form of a thermometer, ranging from 0 to 100 degrees, called the feeling thermometer responses.⁷ In this section, we focus on the emotional temperature towards the three parties with the highest number of seats in the lower house election: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Japan Innovation Party (Nihon ishin no kai, Ishin). In the 2022 election prior to our survey, the LDP won 63 seats, the CDP won 17 seats, and the Ishin won 13 seats out of a total of 177 seats. Of these, the LDP and the Ishin have strong conservative ideologies, while the CDP is considered relatively liberal. In addition, the LDP has been in power for most of the post-war period, except for a brief period, and continues to hold considerable power.

Figures 5–7 show the results of the multiple regression analysis with the feeling thermometer responses for each party as the dependent variable. For the feeling thermometer responses towards the LDP, women have a more negative response than men, in other words, women are more critical towards the LDP. Regarding the use of social media, Twitter has a statistically significant negative effect; that is to say, people who use Twitter are more critical towards the LDP. There are no statistically significant effects for other social media. In terms of social attitudes towards women, representativeness of women's advocates and gender roles are positively statistically significant, and attitude toward allocation of female leadership is negatively statistically significant. Those who are more positive about traditional gender roles are more positive about the LDP, which is considered a conservative party. On the other hand, those who want a quota for women in leadership positions have a negative view of the LDP as the conservative ruling party, given the current situation where the quota for women in leadership positions is not adequately addressed. The result that emerges when women's voices are perceived as adequately represented is an anomalous one, as it seems to generate a higher preference for the LDP. This may indicate a tendency to support the ruling LDP when women's representation is perceived to be satisfactory.

When the CDP is considered as the dependent variable, a positive coefficient is observed for women compared to men, suggesting that women are more likely to have a favourable view of the CDP. Given that women tend to be more progressive, it can be inferred that they are more likely to support the

6 We also analysed the voting behaviour (proportional) in the Upper House elections, but the effects of social network use and social awareness among women are not evident.

7 "Don't know" responses were excluded from the analysis.

Figure 5: Multiple regression analysis with feeling thermometer responses toward LDP as dependent variable (adjusted $R^2=0.061$)

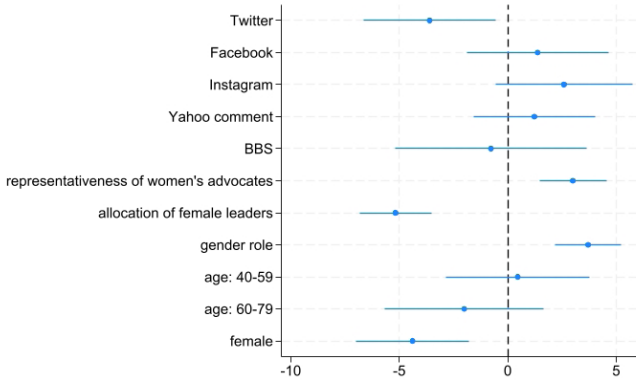


Figure 6: Multiple regression analysis with feeling thermometer responses toward CDP as dependent variable (adjusted $R^2=0.088$)

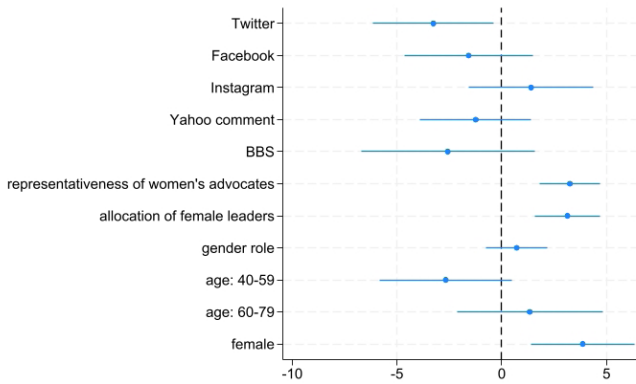
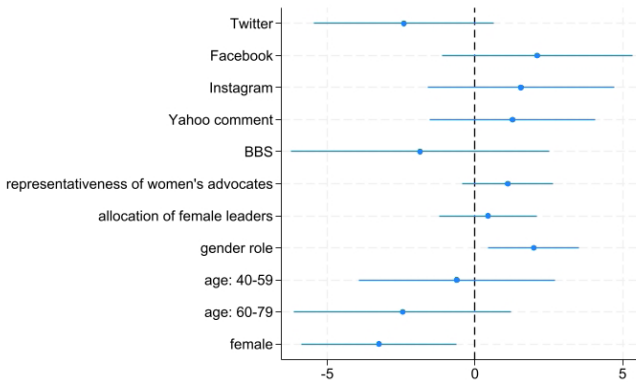


Figure 7: Multiple regression analysis with feeling thermometer responses toward Ishin as dependent variable (adjusted $R^2=0.013$)



CDP as a liberal party. In terms of social media use, only Twitter displays a negative correlation, as in the case of the LDP. In essence, the more individuals use Twitter, the more critical they tend to be of the dominant political parties.

Regarding social attitudes towards women, correlation with female representation and female leadership quotas is positively statistically significant. Combined with the LDP's results for female representation (the representativeness of women's advocates had a positive effect in the analysis with the LDP as the dependent variable; see Figure 5), it appears that women who feel their voices are represented in politics are more likely to support established political parties. In other words, they seem happy with the status quo. With regard to the quotas for female leadership, people seem to expect the liberal opposition parties to address the shortcomings.

Finally, looking at *Ishin* as the dependent variable, women have a negatively significant coefficient and are more negative than men; none of the social media use has a significant effect. Among social attitudes towards women, only that towards gender roles is positively significant. We assume that this resonates with the conservative ideology of *Ishin*. The above results show a direct gender difference in the feeling thermometer responses towards political parties: the effect of social media use, although Twitter, in particular, seemed to lead to a more negative emotional response toward the established political parties.

Summary

Analysis of our survey data revealed, first, that only a small percentage of Japanese citizens participate in political activities online. Social media use in Japan is primarily centred on private communication, including gathering information on hobbies, entertainment and sports, as well as connecting with friends, acquaintances and family. However, when it comes to political activity on social media, there is a gender difference. More men than women use social media for political participation and communication. Men are more likely to use social media to communicate more widely about social and political issues, and to see topics related to international relations and the economy. Women are more likely to use Instagram and use social media as a tool to communicate with friends and family. They tend to read posts about topics close to their daily lives, such as education and healthcare. It is interesting to note that despite the growing use of social media in Japan, men remain more likely than women to use social media for political engagement, and this gender gap is consistent across all age groups.

Secondly, we found that among social media, Instagram and BBS influence social attitudes towards women. It seems that when people use Instagram, they tend to exhibit more positive perceptions towards female representation and

the assignment of female leaders, as well as towards women in general. Given that women are more frequent users of Instagram, our findings imply that merely communicating on this platform could have heightened their awareness about these issues. In contrast, BBS is more popular among men than women, which may contribute to the formation of relatively negative attitudes towards certain women's issues among BBS users.

Thirdly, it was observed that there was a direct gender difference in the emotional temperature towards political parties. However, a clear effect of social media use, particularly for Instagram, which was favoured by women, was absent. Given the apparent association between Instagram use and social attitudes towards women, it is possible that Instagram usage may indirectly result in more positive evaluations of the LDP and the CDP, due to their espousal of women's representation. Conversely, it could also be linked to negative attitudes towards the LDP and positive attitudes towards the CDP through attitudes that demand quotas for female leadership.

As we saw earlier, although Japanese media has drawn attention to the political engagement of women online in recent years, there is a paucity of evidence to suggest that women are utilising social media for political participation. Rather, our study revealed that it is men who are using social media platforms for political participation. However, our research also revealed another interesting finding: a greater proportion of women than men in Japan actively use Instagram, yet they often do so for reasons unrelated to politics. The use of Instagram has been found to evoke and heighten gender consciousness among its users, as we saw earlier that increased use of Instagram is associated with a more favourable belief that female legislators and women's organisations and movements represent women's voices. This may be attributed to the fact that, as a social media platform, Instagram is primarily focused on the sharing of images and videos. Furthermore, it is a platform that is widely used for the exchange of information and communication, especially among certain age groups. To illustrate, parents who are raising children use the platform to communicate with one another, sharing memories and concerns concurrently (Yamaguchi 2022). Moreover, Instagram is also used as a search tool.

Given these characteristics, Instagram has become a social media platform with a high degree of penetration into everyday life. It can be conceptualised as a kind of an "intimate sphere", where the management of intimate labour – taking care of the intimate needs and requirements of individuals in and outside the home – may take place (Boris / Parreñas 2010). The visual focus of Instagram enables influencers to engage with practices characteristic of digital cultures, such as the use of selfies and food vlogging to document their daily lives. This phenomenon of "networked intimacy" creates a perception of authenticity and fosters a sense of attachment and connection between audiences and the influencers they follow (Miguel 2018, Maly 2020). This corresponds

to findings of Verba et. al. (1995) on the subject of political participation and its disparities between genders. Their study revealed that, with regard to voluntary activities in the secular domain outside politics (the public sphere), men exhibited a greater propensity for political participation and a stronger stance on general gender equality than women. Conversely, women demonstrated a clear advantage in terms of engagement within religious institutions, which can be considered a more intimate sphere.

Indeed, in his empirical study comparing political conversations in the test environment and those in the intimate sphere, which is composed of people one knows well and is familiar with, Yokoyama (2023) found that the immediate effect of intimate conversations on study participants is weaker than that of the former. Nevertheless, as conversations in the intimate sphere are an inherent aspect of everyday life and occur spontaneously, such conversations continue to exert a consistent beneficial effect on participants' psychology and behaviour, analogous to the sustained and underlying effect of a bass line, the "basso continuo", in music. Consequently, conversations within intimate spheres can unexpectedly delve into political topics, even when the participants did not initially intend to engage in political discourse, and even in the online domain. However, if we also consider that the attributes of those who participate in online political expression are different from those who engage in other modes of political participation in Japan, it is unclear whether this form of serpentine political communication via social media among women will ultimately result in political empowerment.

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