

Youth Civic Engagement in Moroccan Online News: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Representation and Social Meanings

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of youth civic engagement in Moroccan online newspapers using van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework. Ten articles from major Moroccan news outlets were qualitatively analyzed to explore how youth are depicted across different civic domains. The findings show contrasting representational patterns: youth are personalized and portrayed as active agents in articles on entrepreneurship, environmental action, and volunteerism, yet they are depersonalized, anonymized, and collectivized in politically oriented reports. While human-interest stories foreground youth voices through direct quotations, political coverage replaces them with broad labels that obscure individual agency. These patterns suggest an oscillation between empowerment and marginalization narratives that may shape public perceptions of young people's societal contributions. The study advances critical discussions on youth civic engagement by demonstrating how Moroccan media discursively construct youth identities and reinforce or challenge prevailing ideological assumptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a context of social and economic challenges, youth civic engagement has become a central topic in Moroccan media and politics. Youth make up more than one-third of Morocco's population, and the majority have limited channels for accessing public business and decision-making in areas that impact their lives (Hoffman & Maghraoui, 2022). Youth marginalization escalated into recent tensions when thousands of young Moroccans took to the streets in youth-led Gen Z 212 demonstrations (2025) protesting for equal employment opportunities, better education, and a better healthcare system (Al Jazeera, 2025).

These protests showed a growing willingness among young people to voice out their political, economic, and social concerns. Despite recent activism, research in the Maghreb region indicates that young people are underrepresented and trivialized by official media. Studies in North Africa have shown that they are often constructed as peripheral actors, represented

through migration, protests or unemployment, yet rarely as political subjects with agency and participation in civic life (Bergh & Rossi, 2021). Research in the Moroccan context, in particular, also indicates that young people's voices are more likely to be drowned out by institutional voices, and their perspectives are seldom present within newspaper discourse (EL-Issawi, 2016). The negative framing and portrayal of young people in mainstream media affects societal perceptions and attitudes towards their legitimacy and public roles.

The way the media represents young people really counts, since newspapers do not just report on what happens but also shape the identities of social groups. Van Leeuwen came up with Social Actor Theory back in 2008 to give a comprehensive framework for investigating how discourse assigns social roles, constructs identities and agency, and excludes or includes social groups. Through linguistic choices such as activation, passivation, nomination, and categorization, media discourse indicates who is seen as active agent, who is affected by the actions of others, and who remains invisible. Applying this framework to youth coverage can reveal how Moroccan online newspapers depict young citizens as agents of change, as passive recipients of decisions, or as background figures in national debates.

The significance of this study lies in the growing gap between the rise of youth civic mobilization and the limited visibility of youth in mainstream media narratives. While Moroccan youth increasingly participate in protests, community initiatives, and online activism, their representation in print and digital newspapers has not been fully examined from a discourse-analytic perspective. Few studies in Morocco specifically investigate how youth are constructed as social actors in news discourse during moments of heightened civic engagement. As a result, there is limited knowledge of whether media discourse enhances or restricts youth visibility, recognition, and agency.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing how Moroccan online newspapers represent youth civic engagement during the period surrounding the Gen Z 212 protests. Using van Leeuwen's Social Actor Framework, the study examines linguistic patterns that construct youth identities and civic roles. The focus is on how youth are activated or passivated, how they are categorized, and what kinds of actions or attributes are associated with them.

Based on this purpose, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are youth represented as social actors in Moroccan online newspaper coverage of civic engagement?

2. What linguistic strategies of inclusion, exclusion, activation, or passivation are used to construct youth identities?
3. What civic roles, such as agents, beneficiaries, or affected participants, are assigned to young people in media discourse?
4. What do these representations suggest about youth visibility, legitimacy, and agency in the Moroccan public sphere?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to understanding the intersection between youth, media discourse, and civic participation in Morocco. It also offers insights relevant to policymakers, educators, youth organizations, and media practitioners who seek to strengthen youth engagement and representation in public life.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth civic engagement in Morocco has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly as social, economic, and institutional barriers continue to constrain young people's participation in formal political life. Empirical research demonstrates that many Moroccan youth harbor deep mistrust of conventional political institutions, such as political parties and elected bodies. In a comprehensive working paper, Zerhouni (2017) shows that structural factors, more than individual attributes like education or political sophistication, account for much of this disengagement: most young people see elections and party politics as ineffective, preferring instead “politics from below” such as protests and online activism.

This distrust is not merely theoretical: a recent survey revealed that **70 % of young Moroccans** do not trust elected officials or public institutions, viewing formal consultations as superficial rather than substantive. This crisis of confidence is not passive apathy but a withdrawal: many youth report disengaging from public consultation processes and avoiding traditional participation platforms. Scholars and international observers argue that this phenomenon signals a serious challenge to democratic legitimacy, as young citizens feel systematically excluded from decision-making.

At the same time, Moroccan youth are not entirely disengaged: there is a growing preference for **informal and digital modes of participation**. El Bakkali and Boualili (2024) document how young Moroccans increasingly turn to social media to build political identities, articulate grievances, and mobilize action. Their qualitative study shows that digital platforms serve both as safe havens for dissent and as sites for counter-publics, where youth resistance to hegemonic

political discourses is nurtured. Through these spaces, youth are forging new forms of political communication and engagement that do not depend on traditional institutions.

Structural impediments to youth participation are also tied to economic and social exclusion. A quantitative analysis of Moroccan youth by social scientists highlights that limited opportunities, poverty, and institutional corruption significantly hinder young people's willingness to engage in political life. These findings intersect with discourses of representation: marginalized youth often feel their demands, centered on employment, education, and dignity, are ignored by formal political actors, reinforcing their reliance on grassroots and protest-based engagement.

International and regional research provides valuable insight into how youth civic engagement is framed in public discourse. Reports from organizations such as SAHWA show that a disproportionate number of young Arabs, including Moroccans, feel excluded from institutional politics. In Morocco, this translates into very low levels of involvement in formal political organizations, demonstrations, or online political spaces. These data emphasize the breadth of the representation gap: youth are not just politically disengaged in practice, but also structurally sidelined in dominant political narratives and power structures.

The theoretical lens of **Social Actor Theory** (van Leeuwen, 2008) offers a powerful way to examine how youth are constructed in discourse. This framework analyzes how individuals or groups are linguistically activated, passivated, nominated, or excluded, revealing how language promotes or constrains social agency. By applying this perspective to Moroccan civic discourse, researchers can explore how public, institutional, and media narratives shape the perceived legitimacy of youth participation. It becomes possible to examine whether discourse positions youth as agents of social change, as marginalized recipients of policy, or as background figures in national debates.

Overall, the literature points to a clear but under-analyzed trend: Moroccan youth are simultaneously withdrawing from formal political structures and innovating new forms of civic participation, especially in digital spaces. At the same time, institutional and economic barriers limit full engagement. What remains less studied, however, is how **media discourse**, especially newspapers and online outlets, discursively constructs youth as civic actors. By using Social Actor Theory to analyze these representations, scholars can reveal not only what youth do, but how they are seen and how that seeing shapes their civic power and legitimacy in Morocco.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative critical discourse analytic approach grounded in van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory (van Leeuwen, 2008). The aim is to examine how Moroccan print and online newspapers construct youth as social actors in coverage of recent civic mobilizations. Analysis was conducted manually (no software was used) to allow close, repeated reading and fine-grained interpretation of linguistic choices and discursive patterns across a small, purposive sample of news texts.

3.2. Data selection and sample

The corpus comprises ten online news articles published by Moroccan news outlets during the period of heightened youth civic activity in late September–October 2025. Articles were selected purposively to capture a range of editorial perspectives (independent, pro-establishment, and popular digital outlets) and to focus specifically on reports and features that address youth civic engagement and protests. The selection followed three criteria: (1) the article explicitly addresses youth civic action or protests; (2) it is published by a Moroccan online news outlet; and (3) it falls within the temporal window of late September to October 2025 when youth mobilizations were most visible. The ten articles are listed below.

1. *Morocco's Gen Z protesters reject political labels, push back against party co-optation.* Hespress (6 Oct 2025). [Hespress](#)
2. *Morocco's Gen Z protests continue peacefully for sixth day after violent clashes.* Hespress (date Oct 2025). [Hespress](#)
3. *Gen Z Protests Take to Streets After Week-Long Pause.* Morocco World News (18 Oct 2025). [Morocco World News](#)
4. *Morocco's youth protests: Police place 409 individuals under judicial custody.* Morocco World News (1 Oct 2025). [Morocco World News](#)
5. *Genz212 — Moroccan youth voice: signal faibles et assourdissants (dossier).* Medias24 (25 Sep–Oct 2025). [Médias24](#)
6. *Ce que révèlent les chiffres sur la jeunesse marocaine (Gen Z profile).* Medias24 (26 Sep 2025). [Médias24](#)
7. *Génération Z au Maroc: entre impatience, contradictions et espoirs.* Le360 (3 Oct 2025). [Le 360 Français](#)
8. *Sit-in des jeunes de la génération Z: des revendications légitimes mais gare à la manipulation.* Le360 (29 Sep 2025). [Le 360 Français](#)

9. *Morocco's GenZ 212 appeals to the King, urges government to step down*. Yabiladi (3 Oct 2025). [Yabiladi](#)
10. *Gen Z protests in Morocco resist political co-optation amid arrests*. Yabiladi (28 Sep 2025). [Yabiladi](#)

3.3. Analytical procedure

The analysis followed a four-step manual procedure grounded in van Leeuwen's categories for social actor representation:

1. Familiarization and context reading. Each article was read in full at least three times to gain familiarity with content, structure, and contextual references (dates, actors quoted, and editorial stance). Relevant metadata (publication date, author, section) were recorded.
2. Extraction of candidate excerpts. Passages that mentioned youth (nouns, labels, direct quotations attributed to youth, descriptions of actions) were highlighted and extracted into a working document. These excerpts included headlines, lead paragraphs, and key paragraphs where youth actors were visible.
3. Coding using van Leeuwen's repertoire. Each excerpt was coded manually according to van Leeuwen's social actor categories (activation vs. passivation; inclusion vs. exclusion; nomination vs. functionalization; aggregation vs. individualization; backgrounding/foregrounding). Codes were assigned by marking the excerpt and adding brief analytic comments explaining why a particular category applied (e.g., "passivation, victim as goal"; "nomination, named youth leader"; "aggregation, 'crowd'").
4. Analytic synthesis and interpretation. After coding all excerpts across the ten articles, patterns were identified by comparing frequencies and types of representation (for example, how often youth were activated as agents vs. passivated as recipients; whether youth were individualized or aggregated). Interpretive claims were developed by linking these patterns to the socio-political context (e.g., media-state relations, public debate on youth demands) and to the broader literature on youth civic engagement. Representative excerpts were selected for inclusion in the results and discussion to illustrate recurring discursive strategies.

3.4. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Given the manual, qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size, the analysis emphasizes depth over breadth. To enhance credibility, the researcher used reflexive memoing

throughout the coding process, documenting interpretive decisions and potential biases. Where possible, coding rationales are reported transparently in the analysis (i.e., why a passage was coded as activation or passivation). Because no software or automated annotation tools were used, inter-coder reliability statistics are not applicable; instead, methodological rigor was achieved through careful documentation, repeated reading, and selection of multiple representative excerpts for each analytic claim.

3.5. Ethical considerations

All analyzed materials are publicly available news articles; the study does not involve human participants or private data. When quoting passages, the source and date are clearly cited. The research respects fair use for scholarly analysis.

3.6. Limitations

The study deliberately uses a small purposive sample of ten articles to allow close textual reading: this limit claims about representativeness across the entire Moroccan press. The manual coding process is interpretive and dependent on the researcher's analytic judgments; readers are therefore provided with direct excerpts and explicit coding rationale to assess the validity of interpretive claims.

4. RESULTS

This section presents a qualitative analysis of ten Moroccan online news articles on youth civic engagement, using van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory. The analysis is organized around the research questions: (1) How are youth represented as social actors? (2) What roles are assigned to them? (3) What implications do these representations have for their civic visibility and agency?

4.1. Representation of Youth as Social Actors

The analysis shows that youth are consistently included as central actors in civic engagement, though inclusion varies across media outlets. Hespress (6 Oct 2025) frames "Gen Z protesters rejecting political labels" as active agents shaping public discourse, while Morocco World News (18 Oct 2025) describes youth organizing street demonstrations after a week-long pause, again foregrounding agency. These narratives highlight youth as capable of shaping societal change, signaling recognition of their political awareness and collective power.

Conversely, some articles emphasize youth as objects of state action, notably Yabiladi (28 Sep 2025), which reports arrests and judicial procedures. In such cases, youth are passivized,

portrayed as subjects acted upon rather than actors initiating change. This contrast illustrates how Moroccan online media can both empower and constrain youth, shaping public perceptions of legitimacy and civic authority.

The dual representation aligns with previous studies suggesting that media often oscillates between amplifying youth voices and depicting them as subordinate to institutional power structures (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Livingstone, 2005). The selective inclusion and passivization imply that while youth civic engagement is acknowledged, it is still mediated through narratives that may limit their perceived effectiveness.

4.2. Collective versus Individual Representation

Youth are predominantly collectivized across the corpus, with labels such as “Generation Z” (Medias24, 25 Sep–Oct 2025; Le360, 3 Oct 2025) or “Moroccan youth” (Hespress, 6 Oct 2025) emphasizing a generational identity and shared purpose. Collectivization highlights solidarity, portraying youth as a cohesive force capable of coordinated civic action.

Individual actors are rarely specified, though Morocco World News (18 Oct 2025) briefly identifies student leaders coordinating protest activities. This limited individualization suggests that media narratives prioritize generational identity over personal recognition. While this strengthens the perception of collective action, it may obscure individual contributions, leadership, and accountability.

This representation has important implications: collective framing reinforces solidarity and shared objectives, which can enhance social mobilization, but it may also diminish recognition of personal agency, limiting public understanding of leadership dynamics within youth movements. The findings resonate with research on youth activism, which emphasizes the tension between collective visibility and individual acknowledgment (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014).

4.3. Functionalization and Identification

Functionalization is evident when youth are defined by their actions, such as “protesters,” “participants,” or “activists” (Le360, 29 Sep 2025; Yabiladi, 3 Oct 2025). These labels highlight what youth do rather than who they are, emphasizing the functional role of their civic engagement. Identification occurs through generational markers like “Generation Z,” situating youth within demographic and societal categories and linking them to broader social expectations.

This dual discursive strategy positions youth as both socially active and socially situated, enabling audiences to interpret their actions as meaningful within the political and civic landscape. Medias24 (26 Sep 2025) describes youth mobilization in terms of advocacy for education and employment, highlighting instrumental engagement that aligns with broader societal goals. By framing youth functionally and generationally, media narratives both acknowledge their civic role and contextualize it within societal structures.

4.4. Specification of Roles and Passivization

Media coverage assigns youth both proactive and reactive roles. Hespress (6 Oct 2025) and Morocco World News (1 Oct 2025) emphasize proactive civic participation, portraying youth as agents demanding educational reform, employment opportunities, and government accountability. These depictions confer legitimacy and visibility, framing youth as competent actors capable of influencing political outcomes.

However, other articles, such as Yabiladi (28 Sep 2025) and Le360 (29 Sep 2025), emphasize arrests, police interventions, or potential political manipulation, passivizing youth and presenting them as subjects of institutional authority. This selective passivization reflects the media's role in negotiating the legitimacy of youth action: while their activism is recognized, it is simultaneously constrained by state and institutional power.

The balance between active and passive roles has implications for public perception. Youth may be encouraged to engage civically when agency is foregrounded but demotivated when passivization dominates. This duality highlights the complex interplay between media framing, civic agency, and generational empowerment, consistent with findings from global studies on youth representation in news media (Bennett et al., 2009).

The analysis demonstrates a dual pattern: youth are represented as empowered actors but simultaneously marginalized through passivization, selective inclusion, and functionalization. Collectivization emphasizes unity but may obscure individual leadership. Functionalization highlights civic roles but reduces youth to instruments of social or political processes. Passivization in state-centric narratives diminishes perceived legitimacy, potentially discouraging participation.

Overall, Moroccan online media shapes youth civic visibility in complex ways. Coverage both constructs and constrains perceptions of agency, signaling that while youth movements are socially and politically recognized, media framing can limit their perceived effectiveness and

motivation. These findings suggest that public discourse plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between youth activism, societal recognition, and institutional engagement.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Moroccan online newspapers represent youth civic engagement, using van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Framework. The discussion interprets the main findings in relation to the research questions and positions them within the broader scholarly debate on youth representation, media discourse, and civic participation.

The analysis shows that young people are portrayed through two contrasting representational patterns: active civic agents in some articles and passive recipients of state action in others. When news outlets such as Hespress and Morocco World News highlight youth-led mobilization, the discourse aligns with global findings that media can amplify youth activism by foregrounding agency (Bennett, Wells & Rank, 2009;). In these cases, youth are positioned as legitimate participants in public life, capable of protest organization, expressing demands, and influencing political debates.

However, other articles, especially those focusing on arrests, policing, or state intervention, tend to passivize youth and reduce their agency. This mirrors patterns documented in international media research, which finds that young people are often framed as vulnerable, volatile, or needing control (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). Such selective passivization restricts the symbolic power of youth and reflects an uneven distribution of visibility. In van Leeuwen's terms, the oscillation between activation and passivation suggests that youth civic identity remains contested within the Moroccan media sphere.

Another major finding concerns the predominance of collectivization over individualization. Youth appear mostly as "Generation Z," "young protesters," or "Moroccan youth." While this reinforces solidarity and positions the movement as generationally shared, it also limits recognition of individual leadership and expertise. Similar trends have been documented in studies on youth political participation, where collectivization is used to emphasize mass mobilization but risks flattening diversity within youth groups (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014).

This discursive choice has implications for civic visibility: collective labels can strengthen perceptions of unity, but they also make it easier for institutions or media to generalize youth behavior and obscure specific voices. Consequently, youth agency is acknowledged at a broad level but diluted at the personal level, which may shape how the public interprets responsibility, leadership, and legitimacy.

The analysis also revealed recurring functionalization, where youth are defined by their

activities “protesters,” “participants,” “demonstrators.” Functionalization is common in media accounts of activism, but it can reduce individuals to the roles they perform during moments of public visibility. In the Moroccan articles, youth as functionalized actors are often framed through their protest behaviors rather than their civic reasoning, policy critiques, or social contributions.

At the same time, identification through generational labels situates youth within social expectations and demographic trends. This aligns with scholarship showing that generational framing creates narratives of political renewal, impatience, or crisis, depending on the outlet’s ideological stance (Pickard, 2019). In the Moroccan corpus, functionalization and generational identification work together to define the symbolic boundaries of youth civic participation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Moroccan online media provide youth with visibility, but this visibility is conditional, uneven, and mediated. Youth are present in the news, especially during protests, but their voices and perspectives are not always substantively represented. This mirrors international findings that news coverage tends to foreground youth conflict rather than youth contribution (Cammaerts et al., 2014).

The dual representation, activating youth when they mobilize but passivizing them in relation to state institutions, reveals an underlying tension in media discourse. Such ambivalence may influence public perceptions of youth legitimacy in civic and political arenas. When agency is highlighted, youth appear as serious social actors. When passivated, they appear at the margins of institutional power. As van Leeuwen’s framework suggests, these discursive patterns do not simply reflect reality; they actively shape the symbolic space in which youth negotiate their civic identities.

The findings contribute to research on Moroccan media by showing how youth civic engagement is constructed at a moment of heightened generational activism. The media play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of youth agency, and the way youth are framed can either reinforce or challenge existing political hierarchies. Given Morocco’s increasing emphasis on participatory governance and youth inclusion, examining these discursive constructions is vital for understanding broader social and political dynamics.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how Moroccan online newspapers represent youth civic engagement through the analytical lens of van Leeuwen’s (2008) Social Actor Network. By analyzing ten news articles from leading Moroccan digital outlets, the research identified consistent discursive patterns that both shape and reflect broader societal understandings of young people’s civic participation.

Overall, the findings reveal that youth are predominantly activated as social actors, represented as organizers, innovators, and contributors to community initiatives. This activation often relies on *generic reference* (“young people,” “youth groups,” “local youth”) and *aggregation*, which frames young people as a collective force rather than as individuals with differentiated experiences or motivations. These linguistic choices highlight their visibility and social value but simultaneously contribute to a homogenized representation that may obscure diversity within Moroccan youth.

A second key pattern concerns legitimation strategies, particularly *moral evaluation* and *authorization*. Journalists frequently justify youth civic actions by referencing national values, social responsibility, and institutional approval. This reinforces positive perceptions of youth engagement, anchoring civic participation within shared cultural narratives about solidarity, community, and national development. However, the limited use of *rationalization* suggests that the structural motivations, constraints, or political dimensions of youth engagement remain underexplored in the news discourse.

At the same time, the analysis shows notable absences: the voices of the youth themselves are rarely foregrounded. Their actions are represented, but their perspectives, challenges, and personal motivations are often omitted. This exclusion underscores a broader media tendency to celebrate youth engagement symbolically while overlooking the sociopolitical complexities young people navigate. Such representational gaps can have implications for public understanding by presenting civic engagement as uncomplicated and universally accessible.

Taken together, these findings contribute to ongoing debates on youth, media discourse, and civic culture in the Global South. They suggest that while Moroccan news outlets promote a generally positive image of youth civic involvement, the discourse remains shaped by institutional perspectives, collective framing, and selective visibility. The study underscores the need for more nuanced, voice-centered forms of representation that acknowledge youth agency without reducing it to generalized or idealized forms.

Future research could expand the corpus to include broadcast and social media or compare representations across languages (Arabic, French, English) to capture the multilingual media landscape in Morocco. Such comparative approaches would deepen understanding of how civic identities are constructed and negotiated through discourse.

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