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Review Article

Social Capital and Political Efficacy: A Review of Theories and Applications in the Context of Cambodian Youth

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Abstract

This Cambodia's political landscape has been shaped by its post-conflict recovery and democratic transition, yet youth engagement in formal political processes remains limited. As young Cambodian people under the age of 30 make up more than 60% of the population, understanding the factors that enhance their political participation is critical for democratic development. This theoretical review examines how social theory can explain political efficacy among Cambodian youth, addressing the question of how Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) influence political beliefs and actions. Social capital, defined as the networks, trust, and norms that facilitate collective action, is explored through the foundational frameworks of Robert Putnam, Pierre Bourdieu, and James Coleman. This inquiry discusses three dimensions of social capital: bonding (close ties with family and peers), bridging (connections across diverse group), and linking (relationships with institutions and power structures), and how each dimension contributes to internal political efficacy (confidence in understanding the politics), and the external political efficacy (belief in political responsiveness). By synthesizing regional and global literature, this academic explanation demonstrates that Cambodian youth who are embedded in strong familial and community networks tend to develop higher political efficacy and a greater propensity for civic engagement. However, structural barriers such as limited political trust family or community restricted access to formal institutions continue to hinder broader participation. The conducted study concludes that strengthening social capital through grassroots initiatives, civic education, and youth engagement programs can empower young Cambodians to participate more meaningful in democratic processes. It calls for more context-specific and longitudinal research to fully capture the evolving relationship between social capital and political efficacy in Cambodia's dynamic social-political environment.

Keywords

Social Capital, Political Efficacy, Cambodian Youth, Civic Engagement, Democratic Participation, Community Networks

1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Background

Cambodia, a country marked by its tumultuous past under the Khmer Rouge regime, has undergone significant political and social transformations since the 1990s [2, 5]. The transition to a constitutional monarchy in 1993 and the establishment of a multi-party democracy have created a more inclusive political system, yet the country still faces challenges in fostering widespread political engagement, especially among its youth population [6, 7]. Political participation in Cambodia

has traditionally been dominated by older generations, with youth largely disengaged from formal political processes due to historical trauma, a lack of political education, and limited trust in government institutions [4, 19]. Despite these challenges, the rise of youth participation in Cambodia's democratic processes and political events marks a critical shift. The youth demographic in Cambodia, defined as individuals under the age of 30, constitutes more than 60% of the population [25]. This significant proportion of the population represents both a potential force for positive change and a critical factor in the development of Cambodia's democratic institutions [19]. Youth involvement in national elections, political discussions, and activism has gradually increased, particularly as the country experiences a young electorate eager for greater political representation [4]. As Cambodian society continues to evolve, fostering a sense of political efficacy among its youth becomes vital for ensuring active engagement in the democratic process and sustaining democratic growth. Political efficacy, defined as the belief in one's ability to influence political processes, plays a key role in youth participation. For Cambodian youth, internal political efficacy, the belief that one can understand and effectively participate in political processes, and external political efficacy, the belief that the political system will respond to one's actions, are crucial for fostering deeper political engagement [16]. Given the unique socio-political landscape of Cambodia, where political engagement has historically been low, understanding how to enhance political efficacy is a critical component of fostering a more participatory and democratic society [20].

One of the most important factors influencing political efficacy is social capital. Social capital theory, as developed by Robert Putnam and others, posits that the networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that exist within communities significantly influence individuals' ability to engage in political processes and shape their political behaviour [17]. In the context of Cambodian youth, where community ties, particularly those rooted in family and local networks, are still deeply entrenched, social capital is an essential factor in promoting political engagement and enhancing political efficacy. The rise of youth participation in Cambodia's political events has become more pronounced over the past decade. In recent years, Cambodia has witnessed increasing youth involvement in national elections and activism, particularly through social media platforms. In the 2013 and 2018 general elections, a significant portion of the electorate was under 30 years old, signalling the growing interest of Cambodian youth in the political process [3, 13, 14]. Youth-led protests, political movements, and calls for electoral reforms have further amplified the demand for political change, highlighting a shift from passive political attitudes to more active and vocal political participation. Despite these developments, political engagement among youth remains disproportionately low compared to other age groups, and political efficacy continues to be relatively weak. The reasons behind this are multifaceted, involving a complex interplay of historical factors, limited

political education, and a lack of trust in Cambodia's political institutions [10, 23]. The youth's sense of disillusionment with the political system, rooted in perceptions of corruption, nepotism, and a weak rule of law, contributes to a general apathy toward traditional political processes. Thus, understanding the factors that influence political efficacy among Cambodian youth is essential for improving their engagement and, by extension, the country's democratic stability. Social capital theory provides a useful framework for understanding how community support and networks influence political behaviour, particularly for youth. Developed by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000, social capital is defined as the networks of relationships, trust, and norms of reciprocity that facilitate collective action. Putnam distinguishes between two main forms of social capital: bonding social capital, which strengthens connections within close-knit, homogenous groups, such as family and friends, and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across more diverse social groups, fostering cooperation and collaboration. Both forms of social capital play a significant role in political engagement and efficacy, but they operate differently, especially in the context of youth political participation.

In Cambodia, family ties, local communities, and informal social networks continue to play central roles in shaping the behaviour and attitudes of youth. Family and community support serve as key sources of encouragement and motivation for engaging in political activities. However, the lack of bridging social capital, defined by broader, more inclusive connections, may hinder youth from engaging in national political processes or forming cross-cutting alliances that promote collective action for broader political change [15]. Social capital theory highlights the significance of trust and civic norms in fostering political efficacy. When youth trust their communities and feel they belong to a larger, supportive network, they are more likely to believe that their participation will influence political outcomes. In the Cambodian context, where CBOs trust often operates more effectively than trust in formal political institutions, fostering social capital through community engagement could be a key strategy for enhancing youth political efficacy.

1.2. Purpose of the Review

The purpose of this review is to explore the theoretical foundations of social capital theory and its application to understanding political efficacy among Cambodian youth. By reviewing the literature on social capital, this present work aims to provide insights into how social networks, trust, and civic norms shape youth political engagement in Cambodia. Specifically, this current study will: (1) explore the theoretical foundations of social capital and its relevance in explaining political behaviour, particularly political efficacy, in the context of Cambodian youth, (2) critically review how social capital theory has been used in research to explain youth

political engagement and efficacy, highlighting key dimensions such as social networks, civic engagement, and trust, and (3) examine how these theoretical insights can be applied to increase youth political participation and efficacy in Cambodia.

Understanding the role of social capital in shaping political efficacy is crucial for enhancing youth political participation in Cambodia. As the country seeks to build a more vibrant, participatory democracy, it is essential to recognize the factors that influence political engagement, especially among youth. This study will contribute to the literature on social capital and political efficacy, providing a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between community support and political engagement among Cambodian youth. The findings from this literature have significant implications for youth empowerment, civic education, and democratic development in Cambodia, offering pathways for fostering greater participation in the political process. By recognizing the importance of social capital, policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations can implement targeted initiatives that strengthen community networks, build trust, and promote political engagement among the youth, ultimately contributing to the development of a more inclusive and democratic Cambodia. This review aims to fill a gap in the literature by applying social capital theory to the Cambodian context, offering insights into how social networks and community engagement can enhance political efficacy and promote broader youth involvement in political processes.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Capital Theory

Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, and norms of reciprocity and trust that enable individuals and groups to work together for mutual benefit. It is a concept that underscores the value of social connections and collective action in creating resources that contribute to personal, community, and societal well-being [15]. Social capital has been widely studied in the fields of sociology, political science, and economics as a means of understanding how social networks influence behaviours, resources, and outcomes. Social capital can be understood through its key three dimensions. First, bonding social capital which refers to the ties that exist within close-knit, homogeneous groups, such as families, close friends, and local community members. Bonding social capital is the most personal and intimate form of social capital, fostering a sense of solidarity and emotional support. While bonding social capital can provide substantial benefits in terms of personal and emotional resources, it is often less likely to facilitate broader societal change or encourage engagement outside of the immediate group [15]. Second, bridging social capital, in contrast, bridging social capital involves connections between diverse social groups or

individuals from different backgrounds. Bridging social capital promotes collaboration and cooperation across social divides, which can be essential for fostering broader societal movements and enabling inclusive political participation. This form of social capital can help individuals access new information, resources, and opportunities, leading to increased political engagement [15]. For Cambodian youth, developing bridging social capital is crucial for connecting local communities with national political processes. Last, linking social capital, which refers to relationships between individuals or groups and institutions or individuals with higher socio-political or economic power. This form of social capital connects people to decision-makers, political authorities, and formal institutions that can influence political outcomes. It enables access to resources and information that may not be available through bonding or bridging social capital alone. In Cambodia, linking social capital may include the connections that youth have with local or national political leaders, which could play a pivotal role in shaping their political efficacy and engagement [1].

2.2. Overview of Foundational Works in Social Capital Theory

Several scholars have contributed to the development and application of social capital theory. The foundational works of Robert Putnam, Pierre Bourdieu, and James Coleman have shaped much of the modern understanding of social capital and its relevance to political engagement. Putnam in 2000, is best known for his book *Bowling Alone*, in which he explored the decline of social capital in American society and its implications for civic engagement and democracy. He argued that social capital enhances political participation by fostering trust, facilitating collaboration, and creating networks that support civic life. In his view, higher levels of social capital led to more robust democracies, greater political participation, and increased political efficacy. Bourdieu in 1986, provided a broader understanding of capital by incorporating not only economic and cultural capital but also social capital, which he saw as a form of power that is distributed unequally in society. Bourdieu's work emphasized how social capital intersects with other forms of capital, such as economic resources and education, influencing individuals' access to political and social power. His work is particularly useful for understanding how marginalized groups, such as youth in Cambodia, may face barriers to political participation due to a lack of access to networks and resources. Coleman in 1990, focused on the role of social capital in facilitating cooperation and trust within communities. Coleman argued that social capital is vital for generating collective action and enhancing individual and group well-being. His work emphasizes the importance of networks of relationships in promoting both individual and collective political efficacy, and how these networks can lead to greater civic participation. These scholars have collectively shaped the understanding of social capital as

a fundamental resource that influences political engagement, particularly in democratic societies.

2.3. The Role of Social Capital in Promoting Civic Engagement, Trust in Political Institutions, and Political Efficacy

Social capital plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement by providing individuals with the resources, support, and opportunities to participate in political and social activities. The strength of social capital is linked to higher levels of civic participation because strong social networks foster the exchange of political information and encourage collective action. When youth are embedded in social networks with high levels of trust and cooperation, they are more likely to engage in voting, political discussions, and activism, and to perceive political participation as both important and effective [9, 15]. Social capital also plays a critical role in trusting political institutions. Political efficacy is closely linked to an individual's trust in the political system. Social networks that build trust within a community can also extend to trust in broader political systems. Youth who feel connected to their communities and have positive relationships with local political leaders are more likely to trust that their participation in elections and other political activities can lead to real political change. This trust in political institutions can significantly enhance both internal and external political efficacy. Political efficacy, the belief in one's ability to understand and influence political processes, is strongly influenced by the presence of social capital. Youth who have access to supportive social networks are more likely to believe in their ability to engage in political processes and see their actions as meaningful in shaping political outcomes. This, in turn, increases their willingness to engage in civic activities, reinforcing the cycle of political engagement and efficacy [1, 15]. Moreover, such networks do not only provide emotional encouragement and political information but also create spaces for dialogue and collective mobilization, which essential for cultivating sustainable democratic participation among youth [8, 9].

2.4. Political Efficacy: Concept and Dimensions

Political efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to participate effectively in political processes, and it is often divided into two dimensions. First, internal political efficacy, in which refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to understand political issues and participate in political processes. For youth in Cambodia, internal political efficacy is crucial for their engagement in national elections and political discussions. Without the belief that they can comprehend political matters or that their participation is meaningful, youth may refrain from participating in political activities altogether [16]. Second, external political efficacy, refers to the belief that the political system is responsive to the actions of citizens. When youth feel that their voices will not be heard

or that political institutions are unresponsive, they are less likely to participate in political activities. External political efficacy is particularly important in Cambodia, where youth may feel disillusioned with the political system due to perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, or a lack of political freedom [12, 23]. Strengthening social capital, particularly in the form of community trust and networks, can help increase external efficacy by making youth feel that their participation will influence the political system. The relationship between political efficacy and political participation is reciprocal. Youth who engage in political activities, such as voting or participating in political discussions, are likely to develop a stronger sense of political efficacy. In turn, as their efficacy increases, so does their likelihood of continued political engagement. This cycle of engagement and efficacy is crucial for the long-term development of democratic practices, particularly in emerging democracies like Cambodia, where fostering political participation among youth is critical for sustainable democratic development.

2.5. Why Political Efficacy Is Critical for Youth Participation in Democratic Processes

Political efficacy is critical for youth participation in democratic processes because it directly influences their willingness to participate. Youth who believe their actions can influence political outcomes are more likely to vote, attend political meetings, and engage in activism. In countries with nascent democracies like Cambodia, where political engagement historically has been low, fostering political efficacy among youth is essential for the democratic process [21]. Strengthening social capital can enhance political efficacy, thereby increasing the likelihood that youth will engage in the democratic process and feel empowered to shape the political future of the country. Several theoretical frameworks connect social capital with political efficacy, with the work of Putnam, Bourdieu, and Coleman providing key insights. Putnam's theory of social capital and democracy highlights the importance of social networks in creating a sense of belonging support, trust, and civic engagement, all of which contribute to political efficacy. Putnam argues that social capital is vital for maintaining healthy democracies because it encourages political participation, strengthens social trust, and promotes a culture of cooperation that underpins democratic institutions. The mechanisms through which social capital influences political efficacy is multifaceted, including trust, in which the higher levels of social capital foster trust among individuals and towards political institutions. When youth trust their community and its leaders, they are more likely to engage in political activities and believe that their participation will have an impact, the networks, in which provide youth with access to information, resources, and opportunities for political involvement. These networks can also serve as platforms for discussing political issues, thus enhancing both internal and external political efficacy, and the civic participation, in

communities with high levels of social capital, individuals are more likely to engage in civic activities, including voting, volunteering, and participating in CBOs political initiatives. This increased participation contributes to greater political efficacy, as individuals feel empowered and capable of influencing political processes.

In the Cambodian context, social capital is critical for fostering political efficacy among youth, as it helps build trust in the political system, provides access to political knowledge, and encourages greater participation in democratic processes. By strengthening social capital, Cambodia can foster a more politically engaged youth population, ensuring that the country's democratic institutions are more inclusive and sustainable as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1. Refined Social Capital Dimensions and Their Role in Political Efficacy.

Dimension of Social Capital	Definition	Core Function	Contribution to Political Efficacy
Bonding Social Capital	Close connections among homogeneous groups such as family, friends, or tight-knit communities.	Provides emotional and moral support within intimate social circles.	Enhances internal efficacy through shared values and supportive interpersonal trust.
Bridging Social Capital	Networks that connect individuals across diverse social, ethnic, or economic backgrounds.	Promotes understanding and cooperation between different social groups.	Strengthens both internal and external efficacy by exposing youth to diverse political ideas and civic opportunities.
Linking Social Capital	Relationships that link individuals with institutions or individuals in positions of authority or power.	Facilitates access to decision-making structures, political leaders, and institutional resources.	Improves external efficacy by connecting youth to formal political institutions and reinforcing belief in system responsiveness.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Overview of Social Capital and Political Efficacy Among Youth

The concept of social capital, the value derived from social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity, has been widely used to explain various forms of political engagement, particularly among youth. Political efficacy, on the other hand, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to influence political processes. Together, social capital and political efficacy play crucial roles in shaping the political behaviour of youth, as they determine the level of participation in political activities, such as voting, protests, or civic engagement. Globally, research has shown that social capital enhances political efficacy by providing youth with access to important resources, information, and support systems that increase their confidence in their ability to affect political outcomes. Studies across various democratic and non-democratic contexts have found that young people who have strong social networks, whether familial, peer-based, or CBOs, are more likely to engage in political activities [15, 22]. This is further influenced by the presence of trust in political institutions, the sense of belonging within community networks, and a culture of civic participation. For instance, bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within homogenous groups, e.g., family, close friends, has been shown to foster internal political efficacy, the confidence that individuals could understand and participate in politics. Meanwhile, bridging social capital, which connects individuals across diverse groups, enhances external political efficacy by fostering trust in political systems and encouraging collective action [15]. As is clear, social capital being particularly important as it does not only influence their participation in elections but also their involvement in civic activities, such as volunteering or attending political rallies [9]. These relationships have been widely explored across different regions, from Western democracies to emerging and transitioning political systems, where social capital is seen as a critical driver of political engagement and democratic participation [1, 11]. However, the application of social capital theory in specific contexts like Cambodia remains under-explored, which limits a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics of youth engagement in the Cambodian political landscape. As noted by Heng in 2010, despite the acknowledged importance of youth participation, comprehensive research on how social capital shapes youth involvement in political processes is still lacking.

3.2. Social Capital and Political Efficacy in the Cambodian Context

Research on the role of social capital in Cambodia has been limited but growing, with scholars beginning to explore how social capital influences political engagement, particularly

among the youth. In Cambodia, where social networks, family, and local communities remain central to the daily lives of individuals, social capital plays a crucial role in shaping youth's political attitudes and behaviours. However, youth political engagement in Cambodia is often limited, as many young people feel that they lack the means to influence national politics [12]. The research that has been conducted focuses primarily on youth civic participation, including their involvement in elections, civic education, and social movements. Cambodian youth are increasingly participating in political protests, social media activism, and other forms of grassroots engagement [4]. Studies by Vong and Hok have shown that community-based Organizations (CBOs), social capital, particularly familial ties and local networks, has a positive impact on youth political efficacy [24]. A key study by Len and Sokphea published by CDRI, shows that youth-led political movements in Cambodia were shaped by local community networks, including CBOs, universities, and party groups, which promoted political education and mobilization, especially after the 2013 elections. It also notes how the Social Accountability Framework (SAF) engaged youths by addressing villagers' needs to improve public services. While the dynamics of social capital and political participation among youth in Cambodia are increasingly emphasized in empirical studies, it is important to distinguish the geographic and thematic scope of existing theoretical contributions. For instance, Van de Walle in 2010, in his widely cited work *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979– 1999*, offers a compelling analysis of the institutional and political challenges affecting governance in sub-Saharan Africa. However, his research does not address Southeast Asian contexts, nor does it engage with youth political engagement or the concept of social capital as applied to Cambodia. Nonetheless, the broader principles explored in his work, particularly regarding the relationship between institutional fragility and civic participation, provide useful theoretical parallels that may be extrapolated to other post-authoritarian regions, such as Cambodia. Empirical studies on Cambodian youth have shown that individuals who are actively embedded in strong family networks or local community organizations are significantly more likely to engage in political activities, including attending civic forums, participating in political discussions, and voting in national elections. Social capital in this sense functions not merely as a passive social resource but as an enabling condition for political agencies, equipping youth with the necessary information, encouragement, and confidence to participate in political life [10, 15]. The existence of both bonding social capital, formed through close ties with peers and family, and bridging capital, developed through associations with political and civic groups, contributes to a heightened sense of internal political efficacy among youth. This growing sense of political empowerment, rooted in collective identification and social trust, is crucial for cultivating youth engagement in Cambodia's evolving political system. However, a major challenge persists in the form of low trust in national political institutions. Studies such as Vong and Hok indicate that widespread perceptions of government corruption, inefficiency, and unresponsiveness continue to suppress external political efficacy among Cambodian youth. In this context, localized social capital, particularly trust in community leaders, village elders, and informal peer networks, serves as an alternative mechanism to encourage political participation. These networks often compensate for institutional deficits by fostering micro-level trust, facilitating political learning, and creating safe spaces for youth to articulate civic concerns. Thus, while the foundational theoretical models on political engagement remain globally relevant, understanding the specificities of Cambodian youth participation requires contextualized, regionally focused research grounded in the lived experiences of Southeast Asian societies [18]. Trust is a fundamental component of social capital that significantly influences political efficacy. When individuals trust their community members or political institutions, they are more likely to believe that their participation in political processes will yield tangible results. In the Cambodian context, trust in local community leaders, family members, and friends plays a significant role in enhancing internal political efficacy, as youth feel that they have the support and resources necessary to understand and participate in political processes. Reciprocity, another key element of social capital, further strengthens political efficacy. When individuals perceive that they are part of a network where mutual support is exchanged, they are more likely to feel a sense of obligation to engage in collective actions, such as voting or participating in protests. Social networks that emphasize reciprocity and mutual support help build a culture of civic responsibility, enhancing youth participation in democratic processes [9, 17].

The strength and nature of social networks significantly affect political behaviour and efficacy among youth in Cambodia. Family, peer groups, and community organizations are critical networks that shape political engagement. Cambodian youth who are embedded in strong family networks are more likely to develop a sense of political efficacy, as they have access to resources, information, and encouragement from family members to engage in political activities [4]. Similarly, peer networks can enhance youth engagement by fostering political discussions and encouraging collective action. However, there is a distinction between bonding and bridging social capital in Cambodia. Bonding which connects youth to their immediate social circles, often fosters internal efficacy, the belief that one has the competence to engage in politics. Bridging, which links youth to a wider variety of individuals and groups, enhances external efficacy by fostering trust in the political system and increasing participation in broader civic actions, such as attending national political events or voting in elections. Civic engagement is another key aspect of political efficacy. In Cambodia, local community norms and volunteerism play a crucial role in enhancing youth political efficacy. When youth are involved in local civic organizations

and volunteer activities, they gain valuable experience in working toward social change, which in turn strengthens their belief in their ability to influence political processes. Civic organizations, which often operate at the grassroots level, are vital in encouraging youth participation by creating platforms for engagement, providing political education, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility [9, 17].

In Cambodia, youth involvement in NGOs, youth clubs, and religious organizations has been shown to increase political efficacy by connecting them with like-minded individuals and local political actors. These organizations help foster both bonding and bridging social capital, enhancing political trust and civic responsibility among youth, thus encouraging them to participate more actively in political and social processes. Several studies have applied social capital theory to understand the political behaviour of Cambodian youth. For example, Chheang found that Cambodian youth who are more socially connected to their communities are more likely to engage in political activities, as they are motivated by the social resources available to them. Similarly, Vong and Hok examined how

youth-led political movements in Cambodia were influenced by local community networks, which acted as platforms for both political education and mobilization. Moreover, surveys and interviews conducted with Cambodian youth have demonstrated the impact of social capital on their political efficacy. Surveys measuring youth political participation often show that those with stronger community ties report higher levels of political efficacy and greater participation in national elections [15]. These studies underscore the importance of local communities and peer networks in shaping the political attitudes and actions of Cambodian youth. This literature review reveals that social capital plays a vital role in enhancing political efficacy among Cambodian youth. By focusing on trust, reciprocity, social networks, and civic engagement, we can better understand the factors that influence youth political participation in Cambodia. Strengthening local community networks, peer support systems, and civic organizations will be crucial for increasing youth participation in democratic processes, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of Cambodia's democracy as depicted in table 2.

Table 2. Key Themes, Social Capital and Political Efficacy among Cambodian Youth.

Key Themes	Summary of Insights
Conceptual Link between Social Capital and Political Efficacy	Social capital provides essential resources, support systems, and political information that enhance political efficacy by increasing youth confidence in their ability to participate meaningfully in political processes.
Forms of Social Capital and Their Impacts	Bonding social capital supports internal political efficacy by fostering emotional support and political discussion within close groups, while bridging capital increases external efficacy by linking youth to wider political networks.
Cambodian Context and Youth Engagement	In Cambodia, familial, community, and peer-based networks are crucial for youth political socialization. Youth embedded in strong local networks are more likely to engage in civic and political activities.
Role of Trust and Reciprocity	Trust in community members and local leaders builds internal efficacy, while reciprocal relationships within networks foster collective responsibility and encourage civic participation.
Civic Engagement and Institutional Participation	Engagement in volunteerism, student movements, and local civic initiatives enhances political efficacy by developing skills, reinforcing political agency, and promoting democratic participation.
Influence of Local Networks and Organizations	NGOs, youth clubs, and religious groups foster bonding and bridging capital, providing platforms for civic education, political dialogue, and engagement with local leaders.
Challenges: Low Trust in National Institutions	Despite strong community networks, many Cambodian youths' express skepticism toward national institutions due to historical issues of corruption and repression, which undermines external political efficacy.

4. Critical Evaluation

4.1. Strengths of the Social Capital Approach

Social capital theory provides a strong lens for analysing political efficacy among Cambodian youth, especially given the country's deep-rooted community networks and evolv-

ing democratic landscape. Its key strength lies in highlighting how social connections, particularly family, peer, and community ties, influence political attitudes and engagement. In Cambodia, where informal networks are vital, this theory helps explain both internal political efficacy, youths' confidence in understanding politics and external efficacy, belief in the system's responsiveness, [8, 17]. Youth embedded in strong networks are more likely to vote, attend civic meetings, and engage in activism, supported by the trust, infor-

mation, and motivation these networks provide [4, 15]. Social capital also bridges the gap between low trust in formal institutions and the informal trust built through community relationships, encouraging participation in democratic processes. However, the literature has notable limitations. Most studies focus broadly on social capital without specifically addressing its impact on youth political efficacy. Research often relies on cross-sectional data, missing long-term trends and changes in political behaviour. Furthermore, urban-centric samples overlook the experiences of rural youth, who may engage with politics differently. Important variables such as gender, education, and socio-economic status are also underexplored, limiting the applicability of findings across diverse youth groups. More targeted, longitudinal, and inclusive research is needed to fully understand how social capital supports or constrains youth political participation in Cambodia.

4.2. Emerging Research Needs and Future Directions

As research on social capital and political efficacy among Cambodian youth has gained momentum, several avenues warrant deeper exploration. First, the rural-urban divide deserves closer scrutiny: urban young people often access formal institutions and digital platforms, whereas those in rural areas rely predominantly on tightly woven community networks. Understanding these contrasting pathways can inform tailored interventions that address each group's unique strengths and challenges. Second, the influences of youth-led organizations, such as student associations, debate clubs, and grassroots movement, on political learning and network building remains underexamined. Third, comparative research groups cultivate civic skills and broaden contexts, particularly Thailand and Indonesia, could reveal transferable lessons and context-specific adaptations, offering a regional perspective on best practices.

As its core, while social capital provides a strong lens for studying youth political engagement, future studies should be more context-specific and methodologically robust. Longitudinal research, greater attention to marginalized rural communities, and regional comparisons will help uncover how social capital can best be leveraged to foster inclusive democratic participation among Cambodian youth.

5. Conclusion

This review has explored the relationship between social capital and political efficacy among Cambodian youth, focusing on the role that social networks, trust, and civic engagement play in shaping youth participation in the political process. The key findings indicate that social capital, comprising bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, has a significant impact on enhancing both internal and external political efficacy. Youth embedded in strong community networks, whether familial, peer-based, or local, are more likely to engage in political activities, as these networks provide both resources, such as information and political education, and support, such as encouragement and motivation, that help youth feel politically efficacious. Bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within homogenous groups like families and friends, was found to foster internal political efficacy by enhancing the confidence that youth have in their ability to understand and engage in political processes. On the other hand, bridging social capital, which links youth to diverse groups across political, social, and economic divides, was shown to improve external political efficacy by building trust in political institutions and fostering collaboration for collective political action. The review also highlighted that youth political engagement in Cambodia is closely tied to the strength of local community networks, trust in political leaders, and the sense of belonging within these networks. Although youth participation has grown in recent years, political efficacy remains relatively low due to historical disillusionment with formal political institutions, such as the government and political parties, and the political culture's resistance to change. However, when Cambodian youth participate in informal community networks, they are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to engage in civic activities like voting, protesting, and political discourse, thus fostering both internal and external efficacy.

The broader implications of social capital for democratic development in Cambodia are profound. In a country where youth represent most of the population and are pivotal to the future of the nation's democracy, understanding how social capital influences political efficacy is critical. By fostering community-based engagement and enhancing the trust youth have in political institutions, Cambodia can nurture a more politically active and engaged generation. Social capital-based approaches have the potential to create a more inclusive and participatory democracy in Cambodia. By integrating these approaches into both policy frameworks and youth empowerment programs, Cambodia can build a more informed, active, and engaged youth electorate. These efforts will help ensure that the next generation of Cambodians not only believes in their ability to participate in politics but also has the support and networks needed to make a difference in their country's democratic processes.

At last, to truly enhance youth political efficacy and participation, it is essential to embrace social capital as a foundational concept. A comprehensive approach that emphasizes community building, trust, civic engagement, and political education can empower Cambodian youth, leading to a more vibrant and resilient democracy. Moving forward, future research should continue to explore the intersection of social capital, political efficacy, and youth involvement in national elections, and policymakers must recognize the role of social networks in shaping the political attitudes and behaviours of Cambodian youth.

Abbreviations

CBOs	Communication-Based Organizations
CDRI	Cambodia Development Research
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
SAF	Social Accountability Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

Author Contributions

Sovanna Huot is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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