Social Media for Journalism and Civic Political Participation

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Abstract: Social media kept developing these years, which has a significant impact on every part of society. Especially, this change happened in the field of news communication that has triggered many scholars to explore. They gradually find that the real reason for influencing the political participation of citizens is not the social media itself, but people's behavior of using social media, such as access to news information. In order to explore the impact mechanism, this paper does a regression analysis of the factors that influence the civic political participation, specially analyzing online and offline political participation. In addition, the influence of education levels on political participation is also further analyzed.

Keywords: social media, civic political participation, journalism

1.   Introduction

Nowadays, as media technology develops constantly, the efficiency of messages dissemination witnesses a rapid growth. Within this background, as a byproduct of modern information and communication technology, social media, has penetrating almost every aspect of people's life at an astonishing pace. Notably, social networking sites (SNS) as represented by Facebook and Twitter, have revolutionized information access, enabling users to become not only recipients but also disseminators of information. This interactive information exchange fosters broader public participation.

While it is true that entertainment and pan-entertainment contents dominate social media platforms, research has revealed that social media usage has a significant influence on public political attitudes and behaviors. The Arab Spring in 2011 and the campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 have sparked interest in how social media affects civic political involvement [1]. Existing research indicated noticeable impacts of social media use on civic political behavior—such as facilitating coordination of demonstrations, and creating opportunities for views exchange—these studies are often limited to youth or specific demographic groups, providing an inadequate explanation of the impact factors of social media on political participation.

By analyzing the results of the World Values Survey (WVS) from 2017-2022[2] which involves data from 64 countries and various ethnic groups, this paper seeks to fill these gaps in the literature. Multiple linear regression and ANOVA are mainly used in this paper to examine the effects of news media usage as well as online and offline political engagement, with the hope of draw more generalized conclusions. Through analyzing, the results validate that the frequency of social media access to news does promote political engagement online and offline to some extent. It is noticeable that TV for getting news has negative impact on political participation, which is distinct from other

medias. In addition to that, the research also discovered more educated people have a higher level of political participation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Political Participation

Political participation is the involvement of citizens in political issues which can affect the structure of government, the election of officials and policies [3]. On this basis, online political participation means that these behaviors which influence politics occur in the specific online environment [4]. The birth of the Internet and the rapid development of media technology have broken the barriers of information dissemination, making it no longer limited by time and space. Social media based on internet technology came into being. Actually, people who are driven to follow public affairs tend to use their accounts on sites like Facebook or Google Plus to consume hard news and information that is relevant to the general public. It is reasonable to believe that social media has become one of the platforms for people to discuss political topics as its high interactivity. A new emerging form of expressive political activity centered on social media may be encouraged by the online environment [5]. In fact, online political participation and offline political activities are not separated from each other. Individuals' experience of social media network expression and social media political expression influences users' social media political efficacy, social media political expression, and eventually their offline political participation [6]. In previous studies, there is some discussion about the factors of online political involvement that affect the degree of political participation. In comparison to disparate or viewpoint-free information, exposure to political information reinforces personal views predicting higher levels of online political participation [7]. Individuals' social stature and political usage of social media are possible to be correlated. When users have high social sorting scores, they are more likely to perceive the social media environment as dominated by political content and political conflict, and they are more likely to prefer people who share their political interests [8]. In addition to that, it's possible to bring new groups with lower-risk preferences to online political activism. Online participation may be more common among those who do not think that political activism is productive or that have other motivations, such as the need for attention [9]. While numerous studies suggest that online engagement may be an important driver of political participation, some scholars have argued that the role of traditional media, such as newspapers and radio, should not be easily overlooked [10].

2.2. Social Media for Political Action and Social Activities

The correlation between social media and protests dates back to early studies on media usage and gratifications [11]. Subsequent studies found the impact of social media usage on political engagement depends on individual's motives. Political activity was positively associated with media usage for surveillance and news acquisition, while usage related to entertainment had a negative or modest impact on political involvement [12]. Numerous studies have explored the function of social media for political activities, concluding that political identification, political efficacy, and social media usage are intricately connected, with social media serving as a complementary and mediational function [13]. According to the spiral of silence theory, people refrain from utilizing social media to voice their ideas as they dread social repercussions. People who are susceptible to injury are less likely to participate in political discussions on social media [14]. Recent research results showed a positive correlation between Facebook usage and political self-efficacy in both online and offline political activity. Online and offline political participation were found to be predicted by Facebook use and political self-efficacy. Moreover, male voters were discovered to use Facebook more frequently and engage in greater political activity both online and offline [15].

In addition, many scholars have found that social media has great democratic potential for online civic and political engagement [16]. By using social media platforms, users can access more news information, learn more about political affairs and have more chance to participate in political discussions. They are also able to express political views, support a particular key opinion leader and participate in a wide range of political activities on the Internet. It is reasonable to believe that the development of social media has lowered the cost of obtaining information, increased the channels for the public to express their opinions, and largely expanded the space for people to communicate.

Based on previous insights of the literature, this study will propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The usage of social media for national & world news will have a positive correlation with offline political participation.

H2: The usage of social media for national & world news will have a positive correlation with online political participation.

3. Methods and Measurement

The database of this paper is from the World Values Survey (WVS) in wave 7, derived from 64 countries. Its majority of surveys were done between 2018 and 2020, with a few nations accomplishing fieldwork since the pandemic breakout. According to WVS guidelines, each country is surveyed once per wave, utilizing random probability representative sampling method.

3.1. Online Political Participation

Four kinds of political engagement are listed in this section: "Searching information about politics and political events", "Signing an electronic petition", "Encouraging other people to take any form of political action" and "Organizing political activities, events, protests". Respondents were asked to rate on a 3-point scale whether they had ever done any of these behaviors, whether they might do it in the future, or whether they would never do them under any circumstances. The result data was incorporated into an online political participation index.

3.2. Offline Political Participation

Respondents were asked whether they have done any of these forms of political activities: "Signing a petition", "Joining in boycotts", "Attending peaceful demonstrations", "Joining strikes", "Donating to a group or campaign", "Contacting a government official", "Encouraging others to take action about political issues", and "Encouraging others to vote". Each score is summed to get an index of offline political participation (M = 1.66, SD = 0.52).

3.3. Demographic Variables

Age (M = 43.41, SD = 16.58), gender (Male = 47.15%, Female = 52.85%), social class with 5 categories (M = 2.74, SD = 0.97), income scale with 10 levels (M = 4.89, SD = 2.08) and education with 9 levels (M = 3.56, SD = 2.02) were included.

3.4. Interest in Politics

On a four-point scale from "Not at all interested" to "Very interested," respondents were asked to rate their interest in politics (M = 2.33, SD = 0.960).

3.5. Political Discussion

The index of interest in politics was measured with a single item asking respondents "When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?" Respondents answered on 3 degrees ranging from "Frequency" to "Never" (M = 1.81, SD = 0.661).

3.6. Media Usage

People use various sources to obtain information. This variable includes 4 sources: TV News, Daily News, Radio, and Social Media. Each of them was measured by 5 degrees of frequency from daily to never (Daily = 4, Weekly = 3, Monthly = 2, Less than monthly = 1, Never = 0).

3.7. Statistical Analysis

In order to test the above hypotheses, this study first gives the set of partial correlations of the independent and dependent variables relied on the data of this survey. Afterward, four sets of hierarchical OLS regression are used to explore the effect of each influencing factor on the dependent variable. Finally, the paper further explores the effect of educational attainment on online political participation using analysis of variance (ANOVA).

4.   Result

Table 1: Correlational analysis among all independent and dependent variables in the study.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.Age	—												
2.Gender	-.012**	—											
3.Highest educational level	-.119**	-.035**	—										
4.Social class	-.032**	-.010**	.326**	—									
5.Income	-.089**	-.029**	.275**	.486**	—								
6.Information source: TV news	.202**	-.019**	.005	.030**	.013**	—							
7.Information source: Daily newspaper	.138**	-.096**	.179**	.147**	.126**	.266**	—						
8.Information source: Radio	.114**	-.068**	.079**	.070**	.063**	.225**	.306**	—					
9.Information source: Social media	-.361**	-.027**	.259**	.143**	.156**	.024**	.105**	.044**	—				
10.Interest in politics	.091**	-.134**	.153**	.115**	.087**	.128**	.197**	.156**	.072**	—			
11.How often discusses political matters with friends	.060**	-.145**	.180**	.101**	.085**	.098**	.182**	.162**	.100**	.512**	—		
12.Online political participation	-.095**	-.074**	.247**	.141**	.133**	-.008**	.188**	.155**	.242**	.317**	.304**	—	
13.Offline political participation	.010**	-.082**	.311**	.162**	.139**	.038**	.228**	.223**	.202**	.340**	.350**	.672**	—

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 1 displays the findings of the correlational analysis. The result shows that most of the variables are indeed significantly correlated with each other.

Table 2: Prediction of online and offline political participation.

	Online Political Participation	Offline Political Participation
Block 1: Demographics		
Age	-0.063***	0.024***
Gender	-0.018***	-0.020***
Income	0.014***	0.005***
Social Class	0.021***	0.023***
Education	0.111***	0.168***
ΔR^2(%)	8.00***	9.50***
Block 2: Traditional Media Use Frequency		
TV News	-0.088***	-0.067***
Daily Newspaper	0.094***	0.091***
Radio	0.080***	0.110***
ΔR^2(%)	3.80***	4.90***
Block 3: Social Media Use for news		
Social Media	0.177***	0.152***
ΔR^2(%)	3.30***	2.40***
Block 4: Political Interest&Discuss		
Interest in Politics	0.197***	0.180***
Political Discusses Frequency	0.161***	0.156***
ΔR^2(%)	8.70***	7.60***
Total R^2(%)	23.70***	24.10***

Note: Sample size = 70392. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

The results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that social media used to be informed of national and world news does have positive effects on online political participation (ß = 0.177, ρ < 0.001) and offline political participation (ß = 0.152, ρ < 0.001) of citizens, validating hypotheses 1 and 2. It is noteworthy that the influencing factors of educational attainment, frequency of use of various types of media, and the public interest in and frequency of discussion of politics have a significant impact on online political engagement and political behavior. A total of 23.7% (R^2 = 0.237, ρ < 0.001) of the variance in online political activity was explained by factors present in all four blocks. Additionally, the variables included in the analysis explained a total of 24.10% of the variance in offline political engagement.

In prediction of online political participation, demographic variables explained 8% (R^2 = 0.08, ρ < 0.001) of the total variance. Traditional media use frequency explained 3.8% (R^2 = 0.038, ρ < 0.001) of the variance, while using social media for news results in 3.3% (R^2 = 0.033, ρ < 0.001) variance explained. Specifically, the frequency of using media to gain news and political discussion explained a significant amount. In addition to that, people's interest in politics is also important. It is noticeable that the levels of highest education (ß = 0.111, ρ < 0.001) of respondents have the most significant impact on online political participation. To be more specific, people educated more have more degree of online political activities. In terms of media usage, daily newspaper (ß = 0.094, ρ < 0.001), radio

(ß = 0.080, ρ < 0.001) and social media (ß = 0.177, ρ < 0.001) all see contributions to online political participation. By contrast, TV news (ß = -0.088, ρ < 0.001) plays a negative role.

As for offline political participation, the result is similar to online political participation. Demographic variables explained 9.50% ($R^2 = 0.095$, ρ < 0.001) of the variance, while political interest and discussion explained 7.60% ($R^2 = 0.076$, ρ < 0.001). Traditional media and social media use frequency took up 4.90% ($R^2 = 0.049$, ρ < 0.001) and 2.40% ($R^2 = 0.024$, ρ < 0.001) in explaining offline civic participation respectively. Of all the demographic variables, education (ß = 0.168, ρ < 0.001) still plays the greatest part. With the exception of TV News, the frequency that the other three traditional media outlets used all contribute positively to online political engagement and offline participation of citizens. As expected, social media as a way to access news and information contribute to citizens' political participation. In addition, the behavior of discussing political topics and respondents' political interests also benefit political participation whether online or offline.

A one-way analysis of variance. The relationship between online political participation and education level is evaluated as follows. The education factor is classified as three levels: lower means lower secondary education, middle means lower bachelor, and higher means upper bachelor. And the degree of online political participation serves as the dependent variable. The ANOVA was significant at the .05 level, F = 2376.62, p < 0.05. Table 3 shows the 95% confidence intervals for the means and standard deviations for the three education level groups.

Table 3: One-way ANOVA between education level and online political participation.

	N	M±SD	F	P	LSD
Lower	29891	3.32±1.10			
Middle	32247	3.64±1.26	2376.62	<0.01	Lower<Middle**; Lower<Highter** Middle<Highter**
Highter	31128	4.03±1.30			

**. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 also shows the results of the post hoc comparisons, where the LSD test was used to assess the pairwise differences between the means. The results show that the three groups of respondents with different levels of education do have significant differences in their level of online political participation and that the level of online political participation gradually improves as the level of education increases.

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the impact of the frequency of using social media to access news on political participation of citizens both online and offline, and tests the hypothesis that social media usage does have a positive effect on civic online political engagement and offline political participation, taking into account other news media and influencing factors. Previous research has shown that motivation to use social media is an important factor influencing the public's online political engagement. This paper places this finding from previous studies in a broader sample and validates it. Based on the study of social media, this paper affirms the role of traditional media as part of the dependent variable, which is different from previous studies: in the regression analysis, we find that the frequency of using TV media to get news has a negative impact on the public's political participation, however, the effect of TV media may be reversed in some specific countries or populations.

In addition to this, since educational attainment plays the largest role among all demographic variables in the regression analysis, this paper specifically examines its effect on citizens' political participation and finds that people who are educated further are more willing to participate in political activities.

However, there are some limitations in the research process of this paper: first, the research methodology uses OLS hierarchical regression analysis, and does not further explore the path of influence. Second, in the questionnaire survey, some of the questions have subjective factors. And third, there are many other factors influencing the public's political participation, which can not be fully covered in this paper. In future research, the mediating variables of the influence of social media usage on civic political engagement can be explored more. In addition to this, objective questions should be used as much as possible during the questionnaire to reduce subjective factors. However, there are many influencing factors in this question, so we can only try to carry out control variables to select the independent variables that have a greater impact.

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