Investigating the power of interpersonal social influence on citizens' attitude towards civic engagements in Egypt

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to identify various antecedents that create influential social influence. In addition, it plans to investigate the power of interpersonal social influence on Egyptian citizens' attitude towards civic engagements (individual and collective actions designed to identify and address public and social issues. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation). This study was considered conclusive research, with a cross-sectional design and an exploratory purpose. The variables were identified through the use of semi-structured interviews. Nine interviews were conducted until the saturation level. The empirical findings indicate that interpersonal social influence plays a vital part in the Egyptian Citizens attitude formation towards civic engagements. In Egypt, civic engagements take many forms of activities. It can include direct efforts of citizens in helping the poor, cleaning local neighborhoods, visiting and volunteering in orphanages, and various political activities, both conventional (such as voting and helping in the presidential campaigns) and unconventional (such as protesting and demonstrating social and governmental issues). People in the Egyptian community seek advice and information from various social ties. These people create powerful impact on the listeners' attitude due to a wide range of personal characteristics and how they deliver the message. This study contributes on the theoretical level in the following ways: by adding to the field of interpersonal social influence and civic engagement in the Middle East context; by establishing a proposed conceptual framework concerning interpersonal-social influence on attitude formation towards participating in activities that serves the community; and by demonstrating what constitutes as civic engagement in the urban Egyptian context.

Keywords. Attitude, Civic Engagement, and Interpersonal Social Influence

1 INTRODUCTION

Verbal communication among various reference groups (family, relatives, co-workers, friends, neighbors, etc.) is one of the most powerful forces in the marketplace to manipulate and sway people's thoughts. Individuals often depend on informal and personal communication sources in making decisions and forming their attitude and actions (Elliot and Phillips, 2004). When individuals do not understand fully a certain situation, idea, product, or service, they usually depend on information from reference groups rather than paid announcements. Traditional mass marketing are viewed as being less credible due to the clutter of advertisements. Hence, many people are withdrawing from the excessive media and are turning to close friends and family and other acquaintances to seek information and advice (Bristor, 1990). WOM plays an important and huge role in the civic and political subject matter as well (Fay, 2006).

Political communication research has demonstrated that interpersonal political conversations play important roles in civic participation (Shah et al., 2001). Political discussions create opportunities for exposure to conflicting viewpoints, encouraging political talk that might not otherwise occur (Mutz and Mondak, 2006). Hence, political communication among citizens raises awareness about collective problems, highlights opportunities for involvement, and promotes participation in community activities. From this perspective, news consumption and interpersonal discussion impact citizens attitude formation concerning civic participation (Mutz and Mondak, 2006).

Social interactions whether on the phone or face to face creates opportunities for people to gather information in order to form a judgment and to develop an attitude towards the specified civic and political topics. Socialization effects the enhancements of individuals' culture and education on the probability of partaking in activities concerning social and governmental issues (McClurg, 2003). Civic engagements refer to participating in activities, which make a difference in the civic life of the citizens in communities. These deeds promote the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. Political activities are part of civic participation. Participation in politics refers to the involvement in any activity or event that involves the political subject matter (Bourne, 2010).   The most grand and unforgettable illustrations of unconventional political actions were during the January 2011 democratic revolution to remove the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Massive protests and demonstrations against the thirty-year regime of President Hosni Mubarak spread across Egypt. The after mass of the revolution also encouraged citizens to be active in making their country a better and superior place. Citizens began to clean the streets of Egypt, street protests, neighborhood protection committees, and social services for demonstrators, as well as creative forms of artistic expression such as painting the streets. These wide ranges of events and actions were due to the communication interactions through the Internet, phones, and face-to-face communications (Bassiony, 2011). Therefore, the current study intends to show investigate how interpersonal social influence impact people's attitude to participate in civic activities.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Socialization among various subjective norms and reference groups is an ultimate process of receiving and spreading customs, philosophies, and ideas (McLeod *et al.,* 1999; Scheufele, 2000). Discussions on politics, social issues and governmental problems have been identified as a fundamental aspect in societal consensus building and a motivational factor in sharing interests in civic engagement (McClurg, 2003). Researchers have focused on political discussions as a form of talk and exchange of arguments. Thus, conversational interactions are significant for political understanding, efficacy, and participation (Scheufele, 2000).

2.1 Civic Engagement

Socialization inspires political participation and civic engagement. Civic engagement represents a larger set of events, activities, and involvement that includes political participation and other actions in society. It signifies the actions, beliefs, and knowledge that link a person to their community and other affiliations (O'Neill, 2006). According to Skocpol and Fiorina (1999) civic engagement is *"the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs"* (p.2). Putnam (2000) stated, *"civic engagement historically has come in many sizes and shapes"* (p.27). Civic engagement includes: politics and public affairs; involvement in community associations such as clubs and religious bodies; associations with work organizations and unions; and informal happenings such as sports leagues, picnics, and parties (Putnam, 2000). A person's level of civic engagement is determined by how citizens mentally participate in the society. It can also be indicated by a persons' level of political interest, media consumption, and political knowledge (O'Neill, 2006). This study will concentrate on civic engagement towards political participation among citizens of Egypt.

2.2 Civic and Political Socialization

People's opinions are based on beliefs, which are obtained through socialization. Socialization is a process in which people become aware of their environment, culture, and principles. It helps individuals learn, assimilate, and adopt the customs, norms, and backgrounds of a society. In addition, it aids in the development of the acceptable values in the community. Hence, socialization coordinates people's conduct to fit into the culture and provides foundation of behavioral patterns and beliefs that are suitable for integration into the society (Settle et al., 2011).

Interaction in social networks has a strong influence on the individual propensity to share interest in politics and various civic activities. Previous literatures documented that political and civic socialization is an endless process, which involves the transmission of civil and governmental culture (beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, sentiments and evaluation about the political system) from generation to generation. Through this course of action, people acquire orientations, information, and patterns of behavior concerning the improvement of society and politics (Almond and Verba, 1963). Social interaction creates opportunities for individuals to gather information, thereby supporting the political and community interest of many people (McClurg, 2003; Settle et al., 2011).

Any forms of civic socialization are essentially goal oriented. These goals include swapping information, voicing one's own perspectives, and assessing what others think about the specified topic. The importance of these political conversations was confirmed in a number of prior studies (McClurg, 2003). Eveland and Scheufele (2000) have provided evidence that interpersonal political socialization is a key reliant condition for relationships between various communications and political knowledge. In other words, people whom converse about politics are likely to learn and gain a greater understanding of the political facts and processes. Political discussions are a necessary condition for people to make sense of the large amount of political information they have to deal with on a daily basis (Fay, 2006). Mobilizing information includes news about where protests, marches, petition signings, or demonstrations are held; where to register to vote; and allows people recognize various locations for participating in political actions (Munroe, 2002).

Communication and interpersonal social influence is powerful in spreading ideas and knowledge. The increase interest in political socialization on an interpersonal bases are due to the fact that there is distrust of traditional advertising and marketing; decreasing confidence in politics and politicians; the excessive cost of television advertising for many campaigns and political concerns; the rise of single issue voters who require micro targeting; and growing distrust of campaign media close to Election Day (Fay, 2006). All these factors concerning the rise of political socialization have led to the growth in its importance. Socialization and the power of one-to-one connections between people cannot be taken for granted. Advice and personal recommendations from people who are

close and important to individuals often guide people on the decisions making process and encouragement to participate in politics (McClurg, 2003; Settle et al., 2011).

2.3 Triggers that Create Influential Social Influence

Regardless of whether a social influence is face-to-face, through telephones/ mobiles, postal services, or even emails and other electronic messages, the same word spoken or written by various people can have different effects. The source (the sender) of a communication can have a big impact on the likelihood to impact the listener (receiver). Choosing a sender in which their message causes alteration on peoples' attitudes embraces several dimensions. Past studies tested many messages sent by different sources in order to determine which aspect of the communicator will persuade attitude (Sweeney et al., 2008). Findings showed that the key attributes needed for the sender to have influential power are: opinion leadership, high level of credibility, expertise, and trustworthiness (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Sweeney et al., 2008).

3 METHOD

To gain further understanding and insights on the topic of civic engagement in Egypt and interpersonal social influence on attitude formation, a mono method of **qualitative** techniques was used. Qualitative research is the "*process of enquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur, in an attempt to describe these occurrences, as means of determining the process in which events are embedded and the perspectives of those participating in the events, using induction to derive possible explanations based on observed phenomena*" (Gorman and Clayton, 2005, p.3). **Semi-structured interviews** were casted to collect the data. This type of interviews ask questions that focus on a specific topic and consequently to draw insightful causal inferences. It is flexible in its nature due to the circumstance that the method makes is possible to reorganize interview questions and adjust the process to different situations and interviewees (Hirsjärvi and Hurme, 2006).

The sampling method was based on **nonprobability** sampling (according to convenience). Nine interviews were conducted until saturation level of data was met. The selected sample in this study is **youth and young adults** of different demographic backgrounds (age, gender, marital status, career, and income) in order to ensure a large enough variety in the studied population. Yet the focus was on middle to upper class citizens. The motive for choosing this segment is due to their role in the 2011 Revolution. This revolt is known to be the "Youth Revolution" due to their initiation in the rebellious actions (Bassiony, 2011).

The researcher interviewed all the respondents and recorded the discussion, with their permission. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed into computer files. Once the transcription was composed, the researcher began the analysis.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

During Spring 2012, the researcher visited a wide range of colleges and universities to learn about the youth and young adults' influential reference groups, their civic engagement practices, and their attitude formation towards beneficial community activities. These intensive visits included interviews with administrators, faculty, and students. A total of nine participants, representing different demographic backgrounds (age, gender, marital status, and career) contributed in semi-structured interviews. Table 1 illustrates the demographic comparison among the interviewees. These interviews provided a more reality-based standpoint of the respondents. To gain further understanding and insights on the research topic, narrative analysis was used. Initial coding was first used. Further coding was done to realize the prevalent themes in the interviews and the related quotes as repeated.

Table 1: Respondents Demographic Traits

	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Career
Respondent 1	Female	Age 15 to 19	Single	Student
Respondent 2	Female	Age 15 to 19	Single	Student
Respondent 3	Female	Age 20 to 24	Engaged	Teaching Assistant
Respondent 4	Male	Age 20 to 24	Engaged	Administrators
Respondent 5	Female	Age 25 to 29	Married	Doctor
Respondent 6	Male	Age 15 to 19	Single	Student
Respondent 7	Male	Age 20 to 24	Single	Teaching Assistant
Respondent 8	Male	Age 15 to 19	Single	Student
Respondent 9	Male	Age 25 to 29	Married	Administrators

Political and civic activities and events were not common though, among the Egyptian youth before the 2011 revolution. According to the Population Council reports (2010), results showed that participation in politics whether conventional or unconventional or civic partaking was weak among young adults. Few of them have discussed politics with friends and other reference groups or are aware of politics and other civic and governmental issues. 16 percent of people aged 18 to 29 have ever voted. During the 2005 presidential elections, only 23 percent of registered voters went to voice their choice (total of 7,305,036 citizens actually voted). This number of voters made up 10 percent of the total population (European forum for Democracy and solidarity, 2011). Concerning civic and political duties, only 2.3 percent of all people aged 10 to 29 have participated in social issues during 2010. Those who participated mainly provided assistance (either cash or in-kind) to the poor (Population Council, 2010). The outcomes of the interviews in this study reflected these prior statistics. Table 2 illustrates the results of the respondents' answers.

Table 2: Respondents' Civic Participation before and after 2011 Revolution

Questions	The Responses and Statistics		
Civic engagement before the 2011 Revolution	Yes No	33% 67%	3 Respondents 6 Respondents
Civic engagement after the 2011 Revolution	Yes No	56% 44%	5 Respondents 4 Respondents
Participation in politics before the 2011 Revolution	Yes No	22% 78%	2 Respondents 7 Respondents
Participation in politics after the 2011 Revolution	Yes No	89% 11%	8 Respondents 1 Respondents

Interpersonal social influence has been investigated from the receivers' point of view. When the respondents were asked about the traits, which generate prevailing interpersonal social influence on their attitude formation towards civic engagement, two main themes spawned, "the sender" and "the message". Each construct contained various subthemes. Table 3 displays all the themes that were established in this study.

Table 3: Current Study's Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Evidence from Interview
The Source (The Influencer's persona) (1) Perceived Knowledge (Expert) (2) Perceived Reliability (Credibility) (3) Social Ties Strength	➤ Perceived trustworthiness and credibility provides a higher chance for civic acts. ➤ Reference groups that are viewed as having expertise and valuable knowledge impacts people's evaluation on the matter ➤ Closely linked interpersonal social networks can impact a person's attitude formation ➤ Parents can provide useful information concerning civic engagement ➤ Far acquaintances provide viewpoints and information that are new and persuasive.
The Message (1) Message Content (2) Tone of Voice (3) Message Details	➤ Message content (words) enhance civic engagement ➤ The way information is delivered to people can enhance the attitude towards civic acts ➤ Intensity of tone of voice, eye contact, gestures enhances attitude formation

When participants were asked to think about how interpersonal social influence affects attitude, three subthemes emerged that relate to the influencer's persona (the source of the influence). The first concerned the **perceived expertise** of the influencer. Some typical comments were:

"Discussing and following the advice of others concerning civic and political topics depends on weather the speaker had prior involvement in the matter."

"If a person is known for enhancing their community and helping the public, I will listen to what they have to say about civic engagement."

"If the person I speak to provides accurate information, it will provoke persuasion because I will believe him immediately and will be less motivated to check the legitimacy of the source."

Respondents in this study claimed that interpersonal social influence affects attitude if the speaker is perceived as **credible** and provides reliable information concerning civic and political activities. For example, some respondents commented that:

"I have been convinced to take part in civic participation because the person who was notifying me on the topic was capable of providing the necessary information that allowed me to effectively evaluate my behavior".

"A person's believability and influence can be enhanced if their qualifications are perceived as somehow relevant to the subject matter of civic interest".

"If a person, which I believe is sincere and dependable, speaks to me about civic engagement in a positive manner, I will be open to the idea to join in related activities."

"A person should be believable and realistic in order for me to consider taking any part of political events and community services"

The personal relationship between the parties creates different degrees of influence on the attitude formation towards civic and political participation. The key aspect in this context focuses on the closeness among the **interpersonal social ties**. According to the interviews, strong and weak social ties both influence peoples; evaluation of civic matters. Hence, this study added the subtheme, social ties strength, due to the following comments:

"My attitude towards civic participation depends on how much I think the contact who is speaking to me shares my views and how much I respect their general judgments."

"I gain much of my political information and standpoints from my parents. I trust my dad to provide me with accurate information."

"People outside my immediate circle of friends can encourage me to take part in civic participation or assure me of certain political issues. But generally speaking, I would want to know who the person is, what their background is before I am convinced."

"I have participated in activities to enhance society due to people that I would regard as far acquaintances. But I trust their opinions in political matters."

"While I was waiting on line to pay for my groceries, a stranger gave me information on a charity cause that was worth helping. I trusted them. I think I know when to trust people or not."

The way in which interpersonal ties deliver the message and the nature of the message also impacts the attitude formation towards civic engagement. The outcome of the interviews showed that the degree of the **vividness of the message** (detailed description), the **non-verbal communication** (body language and hand gestures), and **tone of voice** plays an important role in people's acceptance toward civic and political arrangement. Some distinctive comments on this theme were:

"If a person tells me in full details his experience in the engagement, I can reassess the partaking in the civic participation."

"My friend was telling a story related to his political participation with great enthusiasm and emotion. His passion shown in the way he was speaking made me consider joining with him."

"I remembered the remark because the person raved about his experience and virtuous feeling he got."

"When a person is convincing me to join a civic event or activity, the usage of words such as fantastic, inspiring, fun, outrageous, etc. impacts my choice to join him/her.

"The strength and firmness in the persons tone and voice can activate an individual's emotional response towards politics and community services."

"The intensity of the voice and eye contact are effective in convincing people of certain issues. Just general gestures and body language can be more persuasive and powerful than words."

In summary, according to the interviews that were conduct, young adults can listen and take the advice of people that are either close or far contact. However, the person who gives their opinions and facts about civic engagements must be perceived as knowledgeable (an expert) and reliable source of information in order to create dominant interpersonal social influence on individuals. These professed people than creates the ability to alter peoples' attitude towards civic and political participation.

Attitude formation, whether positive or negative, depends on the nature of the message that people give to others. Whether the opinions and experiences of the acquaintances are optimistic or unenthusiastic can inspire other people to get involved in civic engagements. Encouraging messages lead people to feel a sense of enthusiasm, confidence, and cheerfulness. While negative messages allow people to think twice before making a choice to partake in civic activities. For example interviewees commented that:

"The strength and firmness in the persons tone and voice can activate an individual's emotional response towards politics and community services."

"When a person is convincing me to join a certain civic event or activity, the usage of words such as fantastic, inspiring, fun, outrageous, etc. impacts my choice to join him/her.

"After receiving positive judgments concerning benevolent works, I felt encouraged and confident to join my friend and become a member in the nonprofit organization that aims to improve the society."

"When I heard from colleagues that it was our duty to stand for what we believe in and stop the corruption, it allowed me to form a positive attitude to take action and stand for what I believe in."

"Getting information about other people's experience *reduced any risk that I might have had, encouraging me to be affirmative towards politics."*

"*I was in a general conversation with coworkers. After hearing their bad experience, I was discouraged to consider participating in protests."*

"Negative opinions about participating in social issues lead to sympathy and demotivation."

5 DISCUSSIONS – A PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study proposes a fresh perspective on the attitude formation towards civic engagement in Egypt. Civic participation aims fosters the interaction between civil society and other institutions in order to increase the voice of citizens in public life. Civic

engagement includes: politics and public affairs; involvement in community associations such as clubs and religious bodies; associations with work organizations and unions; and informal happenings such as sports leagues, picnics, and parties (Putnam, 2000). These activities provide individuals with a sense of personal responsibility, which combines youth development, civic activism, societal problem solving, and provides new ways for young people to work together for a better community. Hence, these behaviors and activities benefit both youth and community institutions that serve civil society (Sugita, 2011).

In Egypt, civic participation was not common among young adults before the immense 2011 Revolution. After the seeing the outcomes and aftermath of the revolt, the young citizens felt prevailing and regained their confidence in that they can make a difference in society. Hence, civic and political engagements became popular and widespread. The changing behaviors of Egyptian youth in political participation should be seen as an opportunity to engage their vast potential and dynamic energy. As seen during the recent political events, youth are powerful catalysts. In fact, prior academic researches viewed young people's involvement as significant and spirited to the development of the society and their personalities (Sugita, 2011). Therefore, the conduction of interviews in this study explores and gathers information from the youth, allowing them to express their opinions, thoughts, and behaviors.

Interpersonal social influences played a vital role in encourage people to take action in various social, political, and governmental issues. Interpersonal influence can come from strong or weak social ties. However, these acquaintances need some triggers to be dominant among individuals. In order to develop powerful social influence, the person who is manipulating and inspiring other should be perceived as knowledgeable (a capable and experienced person in civic activities). Due to their familiarities with these events, the person should be able to provide reliable information, which is perceived as credible. Due to these findings, a proposed conceptual framework was developed. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research model for future studies.
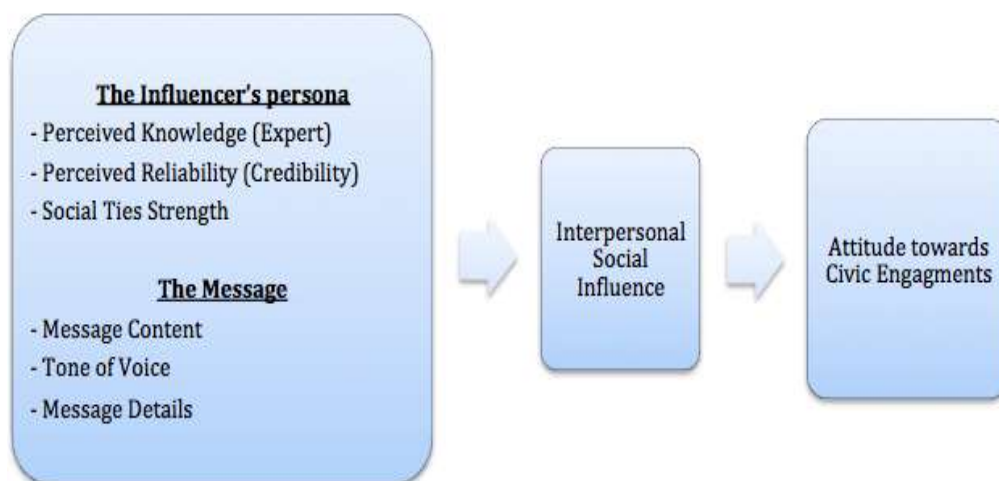

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

6 CONCLUSIONS

Various researches have been conducted in the American and European context on youth civil involvement and their perspectives on the concept of civic engagement. Few work have been done in reference to any Middle Eastern/Arab country (Assaad, 2007). Doing fieldwork to study the youth and young adults' perspectives on their attitude formation towards civic engagement in Egypt aids in

offering a valid and working outline for a theoretical framework for Middle Eastern countries. The interviews were beneficial in providing valuable and rich insight into the subject matter. With the use of the interviews' findings, a proposed conceptual framework was developed for future researches to use and build upon.

The study provides some useful insights for practitioners in the field of civic and political events and activities. Results show that interpersonal social influence plays a vital role in encouraging citizens to take part in various doings concerning both politics and public affairs. Community associations such as clubs and religious bodies; associations with work organizations and unions; and informal happenings such as sports leagues, picnics, and parties should allow their supporters and staff to hold numerous traits to encourages others to join. For example, members should be knowledgeable about the benefits that they provide to the community and government. When they tell others about their assistances they should provide the listeners with necessary information to effectively evaluate various decisions and choices that need to be made. They allow the clearing up of ideas in the minds of the listeners and overcome objections that some people might have. Therefore, they are viewed as reliable and credible. In addition, the participants should sway listeners to participate in civic matters with the messages that they project. Characteristics of the message help impact people's attitudes formation and intention development. The message vividness and the way the message gets delivered are crucial dynamics when wanting to sway peoples' opinions.

This study had several limitations. The first was the small size of the sample and the fact that participants were in a single area. The present study needs to be supported by quantitative research that assesses the range of suggested antecedents as well as the overall model that was suggested. Finally, this study only focused on the receivers' viewpoints not the influencer.

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