Investigating The Effect of Young Adult's Reliance on Social Networking Sites on Political Participation in Egypt

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Abstract. The augmented use and attention of young adults' of Social Networking Sites (SNS) had risen up the question of what are the outcomes of young adults' reliance on social networking sites? In particular the purpose of this study is to investigate the dimensions that predict young adults' reliance on SNS in Egypt while measuring its effect on the Egyptian political participation. This research adopted a sequential mixed methodology, where both qualitative and quantitative techniques were merged for better understanding and contribution to literature. With respect to sampling, this study has adopted area sampling to allow the generalization of data concluded. The findings confirm that young adults do rely on SNS. Additionally, findings of this study prove that there is a relation between reliance on SNS and political participation. Thus, the original value of this study stems from exploring the novelty of reliance on SNS by young adults in Egypt.

Keywords: Social Networking, Political Participation, Egypt.

1 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A lot of work has been done in understanding political engagement to the extent that it was described as a wide variety of behaviors and attitudes overlapping to a great extent with almost everything people do (Greshtenson *et al.,* 2006). The activities describing political participation included voting, running for a position and working on campaigns (Greshtenson *et al.,* 2006) that impact political structure (Hayes, 2008) or deal with electing officials and development of public policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 2004). Also, political participation can be defined as taking part in activities related to politics from voting to convincing others to participate (Kenski and Stroud, 2006).

The importance of political participation stems from the relation between engagement in the democratic system and the equity of the system itself (Rosensrone and Hansen, 1993). It is important to note that participation is also affected by whether the country is democratic or not. In democratic countries, citizens are encouraged to affect the political decision making process, unlike non-democratic countries in which citizens are only allowed to cooperate in the already existing policies (Hayes, 2008).

According to Zhang *et al.,* (2010), there are different views on the relation between mass media and political participation. So far, there is not a single study that gathers all those contradicting aspects into analysis. Yet, they suggest in their study (Zhang *el at.,* 2010) that there exists at least two main important aspects about these relations which are that media does not decrease or prevent political activities and that different content would have an impact on civic and political participation.

Compared to traditional media, the Internet offers (a) inherent interactivity; (b) potential for lateral and horizontal communication; (c) point-to-point and non-hierarchical modes of communication; (d) low costs to users (once a user is set up); (e) rapidity as a communication medium; (f) lack of national or other boundaries; and (g) freedom from the intrusion and monitoring of government (Barber, *et al.,* 1997, p. 8). On the Internet, users are exposures to

political information and they can select to what extent they become exposed to this kind of information, allowing a great deal of interaction between sources and parties which together can bring about political change (Wang, 2007).

The Internet can positively affect political participation, since it allows bonding and decreases distance between government and citizens; thus, allowing more collaboration. On the other hand, just like TV was previously judged, researches argue that the Internet can drag people away from politics and shall never increase their interest all of a sudden (Davis, 1999). Other groups of researchers argue that the Internet will decrease political participation by creating a socioeconomic bias (Kamarch and Nye, 2002). Studies done investigating the relation between exposure to the Internet and political efficacy, knowledge, participation and active citizenship were found uncertain (Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004). Similarly, the Internet decreases the low participation and efficacy of young adults through the variety of blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums that give them ample freedom of expressions, showing them that their opinions are important and of interest (Tedesco, 2007).

2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUNG ADULTS ENGAGEMENT

Motivations of using social networks and their effect on the political attitudes are significant to understand the effect of reliance on social networks on the democratic process. Among several forms of motivations, social motivations are significant to politics (Moy *et al.,* 2005) and as mentioned electronic interpersonal discussions of politics has an influence on the political interest and activity. Therefore, social media being used for political interest would increase activity, especially when considered as a measure of social motives (Moy *et al.,* 2005). This is best explained by the fact that online chats of politics can serve both political outcome oriented (Zhang *et al.,* 2010) and, most importantly, social outcome.

Due to the novelty of the research area, this question is best answered by analyzing how social media came into action all around the world and in particular in the Middle East and Egypt. Since this research is conducted in Egypt, the heart of the Middle East, then the power of social media in the Arab region is essential. "Facebook and other social media platforms are now beginning to define how people discover and share information, shape opinion and interact" (Malin, 2010). It is important to note that online news is gaining readers in the Arab region at interesting and alarming rates. This, in itself, is obvious from the fact that Facebook users in the Arab region amount to 17 million, which is 3 million higher than the 14 million copies of news sold in the region (Malin, 2010). While Facebook does not create or write the news itself, it is becoming a competitor to Middle Eastern news press, as people are more likely to create their own news rather than receiving it traditionally (Hayes, 2008).

In Egypt, to Egyptians the most likely number one priority of searches is searching online for news (Ghonim, 2011). This allows us to conclude that Arabs do rely on social media websites for news consumption and nearly five million out of the 17 million active Arabs on Facebook are online Egyptian who are journalists, readers, reporters, human right activists, social activists and entertainers who engage in Arabic, English and French (Raaouf, 2010). It is, therefore, concluded that outcomes of using those sites would be on a wide scale. In this study, we are interested in the power of those tools and citizenship.

3 EGYPTIAN USAGE HABITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

When it comes to social networking usage, Egypt has become the third after Jordan and Lebanon (Pew Research, 2010). The users of social networking are usually younger than 30 years old and this is applicable to Egypt which indicates that popularity of those tools is most common among young adults and those educated. Six out of ten people in North Africa and the Middle East are under 30 years old. Compared with 41% in the U.S. in Egypt 61% are less than 30 years (Ghosh *et al.,* 2011).

In Egypt, education gaps point more than 50 percent between those who use Internet. Also, there are no differences or limited differences between usage of Internet, cell phone and social networks by males and females, specifically in Egypt (Pew Research, 2010). 56% of young Arabs use the Internet every day, 54% consider television the most trusted source of news (Ghosh *et al.,* 2011). The Arab governments are working on developing their infrastructure to cope with those new technologies and economies of scale and youth (Ghannam, 2011). Many of these governments have a great online presence on social networking tools like Jordan, which advocates citizen government communication for a better civil society.

4 RELIANCE ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Studies reveal that people use social networking sites stems from the motivation to keep in strong touch with old friends and become closer to new own. Therefore, those who use social networks are most likely using it to keep connections with those contacts already made in the offline world and not to make new friends online. To date, there are very few researches examining the effect of social networks on political participation, especially when viewed as components of social capital (Zhang *et al.,* 2010). Also it is suggested that there have been little effects on involvement and participation due to the moderating effect of personality aspects and stares when being exposed to media (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977). The different forms of platforms on the Internet as blogs, chat rooms, forums, and bulletin boards allow people to access information and freely share opinions. This freedom of expression makes the Internet a great tool to motivate interpersonal discussions of politics as compared with traditional hard media (Daekyung *et al.,* 2010)

5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to understand some of the relationships between reliance on social networking sites and political participation by answering the following questions:
RQ.1: Why do young adults in Egypt rely on Social Networking Sites like Facebook, MySpace or YouTube?
RQ.2: What are the effects of reliance on Social Networking Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube on political participation?

6 METHODOLOGY

This study offers sequential mixed methodology. First, three Focus groups were conducted to investigate the dimensions of reliance on social networking. Second, 1000 questionnaires (with a response rate of 41%) were distributed to measure effect of both independent variables on the dependent one as well as measure newly adopted dimensions of reliance on social networking sites. Data were mixed and integrated at more than one level to allow best understanding.

6.1 Dependent variable

This study employs a single dependent variable, political participation which was measured through the questionnaire. Five point Likert Scale with a cronbach alpha equal to 0.753 (1 meaning never done this action and 5 meaning always done). Statements were adopted from previous literature and from findings of qualitative study. Respondents were asked if they have (a) worked or volunteered in a political party or candidate, (b) worn a campaign button, put a bumper sticker on their car or put up a campaign yard sign (c) tried to persuade someone to vote for your preferred candidate, (d) attended a campaign function to support a candidate,

(e) given money to a candidate or a party, (f) signed a petition for a cause or candidate, (g) In the elections for president since they were old enough to vote, they voted in every election, (h) voted in the last parliamentary elections, (i) voted for the constitutional changes, (j) intend to vote in the upcoming presidential elections, (k) intend to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

6.2 Independent variable

Reliance on Social Networking sites was the independent variable in this study. Through focus groups this research attempts to understand what constitutes reliance on social networking sites when concerned with political participation in Egypt. Respondents were asked (a) What are you most likely to do online? (b) What do you know about social networking website? (c) What can you say about your usage habits? How can you describe your usage of those sites? (d)Do you depend or rely on those websites? Why do you? (e) What do you think are the effects of relying on those websites? (f) In your opinion will reliance on social networking affect political participation? (g) How different can this be on civic participation? How do you think social media can help create democracy (a new born concept) in Egypt?

6.3 Data analysis Strategy

Themed analysis was used to analyze the findings of the focus groups. Afterwards, reliability and validity were run. Followed by that, correlation analysis was conducted to measure the direction of the relation between dependent and independent. Finally frequencies were run for general and demographic questions.

7 RESULTS

7.1 Respondents Profile

43% of the samples were between 19-22 years old where 52.4% were males 46.1% females and more than half of the pools 65.9 % were single. Consequently, the majority were college students with a percentage equal to 47 %, thus 32 % (biggest percentage) had an income between 501 – 1000 LE per month. Regarding occupation, 50.5 % were students. Finally, more than half of the respondents (60 %) indicated a political ideology of these 25% mentioned Islamic direction or mentioned something about Muslim Brotherhood. Interestingly, 58.5% use the Internet daily and access the network through wireless Internet 36.8% and are most likely to chat online than to do any other thing. As concluded from the focus group, almost all participants were aware of social networking sites and had different accounts. Facebook was the most used SNS with an 84% followed by YouTube and then Twitter. Those who use social networking for professional basis were the most likely users of linked in and twitter was mainly used for politics and news following than leisure and socializing. More than half, 56% do rely on social networking sites.

7.2 Determinants' of reliance on SNS

The outcomes of themed analysis show that young adults in Egypt do rely on SNS due to the style of news and information (fastest, most updates, mass exposure and triggers further reading) and the interpersonal discussion of politics. Therefore, two variables were extracted and were proved reliable with a Cronbach Alfa equal to 0.603 and 0.852 respectively. The person correlation coefficient indicates a positive relation between style of news and information and reliance on Social networking sites 0.345 and 0.311 respectively. Thus, based on both qualitative and quantitative data analysis we can conclude that; there is a positive, moderate and significant relation between the determinants' (Style of News and Information, Interpersonal discussion of politics) and reliance on Social Networking Sites.

7.3 Outcomes of reliance on SNS on Political Participation

Findings of both qualitative and quantitative studies confirm the positive relationship between reliance on SNS and political participation. In particular, in focus groups SNS were expected to increase political participation due to freedom of expression, motivate people, allow joining of different parties, transparency and were a great weapon in the most recent revolution in Egypt. The results of correlation analysis indicates a positive relation between reliance on SNS and Political participation in Egypt. In particular the Pearson Correlation Coeffient indicate a value equal to 0.198. As a conclusion, from both qualitative and quantitative analysis we can conclude that reliance on social networking has a positive relation with political participation in Egypt.

8 IMPLICATIONS

This study has proved that reliance on SNS by young adults in Egypt will not only affect the political participation but will also contribute to democracy development in this transitional period that Egypt is witnessing. This implies that; First, traditional Egyptian media (TV and print media.) is failing to attract and appeal to this age group in particular. This could be due to representation, content or tone of shows. Furthermore, it implies that young adults in Egypt are not passive consumers of media but on the contrary they use those sites because they are consumer lead and so allow users to watch what they want and control it as per their convenience unlike traditional media. Finally, this implies that traditional media is successfully granting consumers the option of following them on SNS and thus would lead to more reliance on SNS.

Second, a great implication derived from dimensions of reliance is that SNS succeed to provide Egyptians with a platform for Interpersonal discussion of politics that was long prohibited and banned in the offline context. It also implies that those platforms when used by Egyptians will be mostly rich with news and political conversations over any other topics. Finally, it leads to the conclusion that more and more Egyptians are involved into political discussions with respect to the transitional period that Egypt is witnessing.

Third, Political participation among young adults will be increased in Egypt through more reliance on SNS. In particular, it means that participation in political activities like elections and campaigning can be enhanced among young adults through their use of SNS. This demonstrates that young adults learn more about politics, learn about opinions and nominees, search and formulate opinions regarding politics through SNS or even outreach for the voting locations. This also means that this platform has succeeded in fulfilling the political needs of young adults in Egypt.

9 CONTRIBUTION

This study has contributed two different variables that constitute the reliance on SNS by young Egyptian Adults *in Egypt* while to date there are almost no famous studies that investigate what causes young Egyptian adults to rely on SNS. Therefore this study contributes to the understanding of the rationale behind increased reliance on SNS by young adults in Egypt. Most studies combing SNS and political participation are conduced in democratic countries (like US and Europe). Thus, this study contributes to the literature *by providing a comparison between* this combination in developing vs. countries in transition like Egypt.

From a practical perspective, this study with its emphasis on SNS offers a great importance to the societies (Zhang *et al.*, 2009). This study, in particular, offers guidance to governments, civil groups, candidates, activists, citizens and all those who contribute the online Egyptian community (Ghannam, 2011). Also, the findings can be applicable to the Middle East due to the fact that Egypt is the center of the region. This study offers a novel

understanding of the Egyptian users on Facebook as the most used SNS in Egypt. Understanding the motives behind the use of SNS and the behaviors that happen on them does not only benefit the political societies in Egypt, but also marketers and practitioners in the media market.

10 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has limitations that are pondered below in order to be considered in future studies. Firstly, this study is conducted in a time were Egypt is going through transition. To date there are still strikes, protests and residuals of the rise of January 25. This might affect the behaviors of respondents when answering questionnaires. It might have also caused focus group respondents to overstate the value of SNS. This study is cross sectional since the sample was collected only once. The longitudinal effect on more than one incident can show how SNS leads to participation in politics. For example, if a cross section is collected pre and post the revolution, it will give better insights. The scales for political, were all adopted from studies conducted in the US and Europe where activities might be different and the statements used might not be very relevant to a less democratic country like Egypt. As for future research, the following should be considered. First, including political variables of political interest, ideology, efficacy and knowledge into the model while testing the effect of reliance on SNS and political participation. Second, considering the different types of users and uses when investigating reliance on SNS. There are different types of SNS users, for example those who are active users, passive users and broadcasters. Also, different ways of communication and skills must be controlled.

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