Civic Participation and Facebook
A Cross Sectional Survey of Pakistani University Students

Qaisar Khalid Mahmood[1] & Muhammad Saud[2]

[1]Department of Sociology, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan
[2]Department of Sociology, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

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Abstract: Regarding the potential of Facebook to bring in positive changes into the civic and political life of the people, there is disagreement among scholars. Optimists believe that social networking sites (SNSs) have changed political and social life worldwide (Attia et al., 2011). These sites have influenced political environments and induced social changes in various countries (Cook, 2010; Marandi et al., 2010; Shaheen, 2008; Guobin, 2010; Smeltzer & Keddy, 2010). Particularly, Facebook has provided new opportunities for citizens to engage, discuss and debate in the political realm (Crompton, 2008). Facebook has transformed the socio-political scenario of Pakistan as well. Academics have reported that Pakistani youths use Facebook for social and political purposes (Mahmood, Zakar & Zakar, 2018; Mahmood, Bhutta, ul Haq, 2018; Mahmood, 2017). This study has examined the relationship between Facebook use and the civic participation of Pakistani youths. The data was collected from university students studying at the different universities in Lahore. The results indicated that Pakistani university students participate in various civic activities. The study also found that the Facebook use of students correlated with their civic participation.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, various online social networking tools and services have been developed. These tools and services include weblogs, social networking sites, forums and instant messaging (Johnston et al., 2013). Online social networks can be defined as virtual communities that interact and pool resources through computer-mediated relationships. Most of the time, this type of network consists of people that share common interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Among them, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are widely recognised online social networks for all segments of society and every age group (Governatori & Iannella, 2011). An online social network site can be defined as a set of web-based services that allows individuals to '(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within their system' (Boyd and Ellison 2008, p. 221).

Civic engagement refers to the efforts by individuals in addressing social issues, such as signing a petition, making donations, campaigning for a social cause and voting. Civic engagement has many definitions (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Ehrlich, 2000; Shah et al., 2001; Hay, 2007; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008). For Putnam, civic engagement is mainly correlated with the "peoples' connections within the life of their communities" (1995b, p. 665). He views civic participation as participation in community organisations and mutual trust among the community members (Putnam, 1995; 2000). Ehrlich (2000) defined civic engagement as a 'means [of] working either through political or non-political processes to make a difference in a community by promoting quality of life in a community'. Carpini (2004) defines civic participation as "activities that that address community concerns through non-governmental or no electoral means', such as volunteering or working in a community project". Various scholars have conducted studies to measure civic participation through SNS use (Zhang et al., 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009). In this research, civic participation is regarded as a multi-

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faceted construct that embraces a variety of notions of Internet activism, such as collecting information, publishing information, having dialogues with others, coordinating activities and lobbying decision makers to make changes (Denning, 2000).

Social networking sites such as Facebook make affordable information dissemination and retrieval possible. SNSs have provided new opportunities for citizens to engage, discuss and debate in the political realm (Crompton, 2008). Consequently, SNSs have changed political and social life worldwide (Attia et al., 2011). These sites have influenced political environments and induced social changes in various countries (Cook, 2010; Marandi et al., 2010; Shaheen, 2008; Guobin, 2010; Smeltzer & Keddy, 2010). In USA, SNSs have become a critical factor in changing the political partisanship and triggering political activism during elections (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). Particularly, this can be seen after the success of Barack Obama in the 2008 general elections, when he was titled as 'The First Internet President' (Greengard, 2009). Researchers thus investigated the tactful use of SNSs in changing the American political environment. Several scholars have discussed SNS utilization in 2008's American presidential election and they have argued that the decisiveness of these sites has a part in Obama's success (Talbot, 2008).

Likewise as in the USA, several European countries also have used e-campaigning for their citizens called e-voting guides, which are a popular forum offered through public policy and research institutes to increase voter turnout, which helps the public to choose the best party or candidate on the basis of numerous statements (van Dijk, 2013). Alongside Europe and the USA, the power of SNSs also could not be ignored in Middle Eastern countries; there was Twitter use in the political uprising in Iran (Karagiannopoulos, 2012) and Facebook use in the overthrowing the dictatorships in Middle East countries (Attia et al., 2011).

Researchers who advocate the use of SNS in political participations argue that SNS have been used for stimulating various political activities in a wide variety of examples, such as political information dissemination (Tolbert & Mcneal, 2003), political campaigns (Castells, 2009; Gueorguieva, 2006; Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009) and political dialogue and discussions (Chambers, 2003). Nevertheless, traditional scholarships on voting, donating money and volunteering for political campaigns have been considered fundamental for effective democracy (Putnam, 2000). In recent times, these conventional acts of political participation have been seen of as declining (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010). Recent studies have provided evidence that SNSs have been used by political parties and candidates to promote fund-raising and volunteering efforts, thus strengthening the democratic process (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Gueorguieva, 2008). Gueorguieva (2008) confirmed that SNSs have become a useful source for the collection of funds and to enhance voluntary participation. This finding has been confirmed by the other studies as well (Vitak et al., 2011).

SNSs have also become an innovative medium for young people to get themselves involved in the political process (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). This is because of their potential in engaging youths in discussions, debates, and public awareness issues that young people care about (Rheingold, 2008). For instance, American youths utilised SNSs for political purposes during the 2008 elections. In this election, American young adults used SNSs to learn about the candidates, to form and join political groups, to participate in political discussion, and to share political information with others (Fernandes et al, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011). In the 2012 election as well, they made use of SNSs to promote political material, to encourage others to vote, to post their thoughts on current issues, and to follow officials or candidates (Rainie et al, 2012). Despite the fact that academics have recognised the importance of Facebook in perpetuating online civic engagement, some scholars argue that civic efforts should not be Facebooked or tweeted (Koch, 2008; Gladwell, 2010).

Likewise in other countries, Facebook has transformed the socio-political scenario of Pakistan as well. Academics have reported that Pakistani youths use Facebook for both social and political purposes (Mahmood, Zakar & Zakar, 2018; Mahmood, Bhutta, ul Haq, 2018, Mahmood, 2017, Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). Little is known about the civic use of Facebook among youths, particularly university students. It is observed that university students are utilising this platform for raising their voices on public problems. However, no empirical evidence is available to support this argument. The current study is designed to address this research gap.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study was cross-sectional in nature with the population being university students studying in

various universities in Lahore, Pakistan. By opting for the survey research method, a sample of 1,245 students was surveyed.

In order to measure general Facebook use, two scales were used. The first scale measured the intensity of the student's Facebook use. This scale was developed by Ellison et al. (2006). The Facebook Intensity Scale consisted of two self-reported Facebook behaviours. The first part referred to amount of daily Facebook use and the total number of friends on their Facebook profile. For measuring emotional connectedness and its integration into the individuals' daily activities, six Likert-scale attitudinal items were developed by the authors. The second scale measured relationship maintenance behaviours. Relationship maintenance behaviours refer to "the individuals' likelihood to engage in directed communication behaviours that represent relationship maintenance activities and that signal attention and investment in one's contacts on the system through small but meaningful actions" (Ellison et al, 2014).

The dependent variable of the study was the civic participation of the students. 'The Index of Civic and Political Engagement' was developed by Andolina and their colleagues (2003) to measure civic and political participation. This scale was used by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) and Valenzuela et al (2009). After reviewing the scales and Putnam's view of civic participation, the researcher adapted the themes and constructed a scale to measure the online and offline civic participation of the Pakistani students.

Online civic participation was assessed through nine items. In these items, the researchers examined the various civic participation acts (e.g. updating status about public problems, uploading videos related to social issues, commenting on other's statuses that deal with social issues etc.) of the students performed by using Facebook. To assess the offline civic participation of the students, a scale was developed for traditional civic behaviour (e.g.

participation in seminars, awareness walks, non-governmental organisations, fund raising, etc.).

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Online civic participation of the students

Facebook has been utilised by the students for spreading information related to social issues and public problems. They spread information by posting information, uploading pictures and by sharing video clips on social issues. This activity is considered to be a significant indicator of online civic participation. Pakistani youths have also shared information about their societal problems. The majority of the respondents frequently posted text about public issues and they shared video clips related to public problems as well. Additionally, more than two-fifths of the respondents posted public pictures about social issues on their profile pages (see Table 1).

Facebook is one of the online platforms that have become popular among Pakistani students for sharing their point of views on public issues. Most of the respondents often discussed various social problems through Facebook-based social groups. Besides discussing public problems, Facebook has tactfully been used for arranging and managing online campaigns to increase awareness among the masses about social problems. The findings (Table 1) indicate that the Pakistani youths were also using the social networking site for inviting people to join welfare activities, taking part in online campaigns for awareness and also managing groups which were created to highlight social issues. On the basis of these results, it was concluded that the majority of the Pakistani students were performing their civic responsibilities through Facebook. In other words, they had a good level of online civic participation.

Table 1. Online Civic Participation of the Students

Items	A f (%)	VO f (%)	S f (%)	R f (%)	N f (%)
I post text about public issues on my profile page.	342 (27.5)	316 (25.4)	213 (17.1)	136 (10.9)	238 (19.1)
I post video clips about public issues on my profile page.	254 (20.4)	336 (27.0)	206 (16.5)	192 (15.4)	257 (20.6)
I post pictures about public issues on my profile page.	286 (23.0)	292 (23.5)	206 (16.5)	184 (14.8)	277 (22.2)
I discuss various public issues in Facebook-based online social groups.	265 (21.3)	277 (22.2)	227 (18.2)	183 (14.7)	293 (23.5)

I invite people through Facebook to do different social activities.	277 (22.2)	312 (25.1)	197 (15.8)	209 (16.8)	250 (20.1)
I motivate people through Facebook to participate in welfare activities.	244 (19.6)	321 (25.8)	259 (20.8)	186 (14.9)	235 (18.9)
I take part in various online campaigns on the awareness of social issues.	253 (20.3)	334 (26.8)	204 (16.4)	201 (16.1)	253 (20.3)
I share the information of needy people on Facebook.	273 (21.9)	299 (24.0)	233 (18.7)	216 (17.3)	224 (18.0)
I manage Facebook groups where members discuss various social issues.	266 (21.4)	282 (22.7)	246 (19.8)	190 (15.3)	261 (21.0)
f=number of students, %=percentage, A= Always, VO=Very Often, S=Sometimes, R=Rarely, N= Never					

3.2 Offline civic participation of the students

Despite participating in online civic activities, university students showed a mixed response toward offline civic participation. Less than two-fourths of the respondents participated in fund collection campaigns in case of emergency situations in the country. Concerning participating in seminars on social issues arranged at the campus, almost equal proportions of the sample replied positively and negatively. Furthermore, more than two-fourths of
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the respondents had never or rarely worked as volunteers with NGOs working for social causes. Similarly, a majority of the respondents never or rarely attended awareness walks organised inside and outside of the campus. Regarding participation in public protests and community activities, the findings indicate similar trends, in that Pakistani students did not take part in these activities. In view of these results (Table 2), it was concluded that Pakistani university students had a low level of offline civic participation.

Table 2: Offline Civic Participation of the Students

Items	A	VO	S	R	N
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
I participate in campaigns arranged for fund collection in emergencies.	232 (18.6)	242 (19.4)	234 (18.8)	228 (18.3)	309 (24.8)
I participate in seminars at my campus arranged on social issues.	235 (18.9)	259 (20.8)	290 (23.3)	215 (17.3)	246 (19.8)
I volunteer myself for NoGOs works for the social causes.	213 (17.1)	220 (17.7)	273 (21.9)	261 (21.0)	278 (22.3)
I attend different awareness walks inside and outside of campus.	173 (13.9)	261 (21.0)	322 (25.9)	237 (19.0)	252 (20.2)
I motivate colleagues to participate in events on the awareness of social issues.	224 (18.0)	252 (20.2)	325 (26.1)	228 (18.3)	216 (17.3)
I take part in protests being held on any public or social issue.	180 (14.5)	235 (18.9)	266 (21.4)	255 (20.5)	309 (24.8)
I take part in community activities to solve local problems.	195 (15.7)	232 (18.6)	285 (22.9)	213 (17.1)	320 (25.7)
f=number of students, %=percentage, A= Always, VO=Very Often, S=Sometimes, R=Rarely, N= Never					

Table 3: Pearson's r Correlation between Independent Variables and Civic Participation

Variables	Online Civic Participation	Offline Civic Participation
Demographic		
Age	.133[***]	.142[***]
GPA	.034	.072[*]
Monthly Family Income	.041	.022

Facebook Profile		
Number of Facebook Accounts	.031	.010
Duration of Facebook Account	.103[***]	.014
Average Time Spent on Facebook in Day	.232[***]	.048
Number of Facebook Friends	.187[***]	.114[***]
Number of Close Friends on Facebook	.148[***]	.077[**]
Facebook Use		
Facebook Intensity	.459[***]	.353[***]
Facebook Relationship Maintenance Behaviours	.360[***]	.302[***]
[*]p<.05, [**]p<.01, [***]p<.001		

3.3 Online civic participation of the students

The findings (Table 3) illustrate that the age of the respondents was positively correlated with their online civic participation (r=.133, p<0.001) and offline civic participation (r=.142, p<0.001). Moreover, the academic performance (GPA) of the students had a positive and significant relationship with their offline civic participation (r=0.072, p<.05). However, the correlation coefficient indicated a weak relationship among the variables.

With reference to their Facebook profile, there was a significant relationship between the duration of having had a Facebook account and online civic participation (r= 0.103, p<0.001), but this had no significant relationship with the offline civic participation (r= 0.014, p>0.05) of the students. Similarly, the average time spent on Facebook in a day by the students was correlated with online civic participation (r= 0.232, p<0.001) and had no relationship with offline civic participation (r= 0.048, p>0.05) of the students. In addition, the number of Facebook friends that the students had had a significant relationship with both the online civic participation (r= 0.187, p<0.001) and offline civic participation (r= 0.114, p<0.001) of the students. The number of their actual or close friends on Facebook was also correlated with the online civic participation (r= 0.148, p<0.001) and offline civic participation (r= 0.077, p<0.01) of the students. Table 3 shows that the Facebook intensity of the students was significantly correlated with both online civic participation (r=0.459, p<0.001) and offline civic participation (r= 0.353, p<0.01). Moreover, there was a statistically significant relationship between the Facebook relationship maintenance behaviours of the students and online civic participation (r=0.360, p<0.001) as well as with offline civic participation (r=0.302, p<0.001).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Historically in Pakistan, it is reported that students have been less involved in political and civic activities due to certain reasons (Aurangzeb, 2008). However, they have shown their interest in socio-political activities in recent years (Mahmood, 2017). This is due to the proliferation of SNSs in Pakistani society. The proliferation of SNSs has transformed the traditional ways of political interaction. Particularly for Pakistani youths, who are the most vivid users of SNSs, Facebook use acts as a social facilitator and enabler for them (Mahmood, Zakar & Zakar, 2018). This study revealed that they used Facebook for positive purposes. Taking into account the findings, it can be concluded that this platform has become a digital public sphere as young Pakistani Facebook users are utilising Facebook for civic purposes.

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