

International Journal of Sociology (IJS)

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Article History

Received 29th March 2024

Received in Revised Form 16th April 2024

Accepted 27th April 2024

How to Cite

Brown, S. (2024). Social Media Usage and Political Participation in the United States. *International Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), 1 – 12.
<https://doi.org/10.47604/ij.s.2588>

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to analyze the social media usage and political participation in the United States.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Social media usage in the United States both enhances and complicates political participation. It facilitates information sharing and activism but also fosters filter bubbles and misinformation. Despite its capacity to mobilize individuals, its influence varies across demographics and ideologies. Thus, while it can enhance democratic engagement, it also presents challenges that necessitate careful regulation.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social capital theory, uses and gratifications theory & digital divide theory may be used to anchor future studies on analyze the social media usage and political participation in the United States. Provides practical tools and strategies for individuals to navigate the digital landscape effectively, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry. Encourages policymakers to prioritize investments in digital literacy education as part of broader efforts to promote civic engagement and democratic resilience.

Keywords: *Social Media Usage, Political Participation*

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INTRODUCTION

Political participation encompasses various forms of civic engagement, including voting turnout, engagement in political discussions, and activism, which are crucial indicators of democratic health in developed economies. In the United States, voter turnout has fluctuated over the years, with recent trends showing a gradual increase. For example, in the 2020 presidential election, voter turnout reached its highest level in over a century, with approximately 66.7% of eligible voters casting their ballots (Pew Research Center, 2021). Similarly, engagement in political discussions among Americans has been facilitated by digital platforms, with social media playing a significant role in shaping political discourse. According to a study by Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009), social media platforms like Facebook have provided individuals with opportunities to engage in political discussions, share political content, and mobilize support for various causes.

In developed economies such as Japan, political participation takes on unique characteristics influenced by cultural and institutional factors. Despite having relatively low voter turnout compared to other developed countries, Japan has witnessed a resurgence in political activism in recent years. For instance, the 2019 general election saw a slight increase in voter turnout, with approximately 52.6% of eligible voters casting their ballots (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2019). Additionally, engagement in political discussions has been facilitated by traditional media outlets and online forums, with citizens expressing their opinions on various political issues. This highlights the importance of understanding the contextual factors that shape political participation in diverse developed economies.

In developing economies, political participation often faces unique challenges influenced by socio-economic disparities, institutional weaknesses, and cultural factors. For instance, in countries like Brazil, voter turnout has historically been high, with a notable increase in recent years. In the 2018 general election, Brazil experienced a turnout of approximately 79.7%, reflecting a growing interest and engagement in the political process among citizens (International IDEA, 2020). However, despite high voter turnout, engagement in political discussions and activism can be hindered by issues such as limited access to education and information, as well as political polarization. Nonetheless, initiatives leveraging digital platforms and community-based organizations have emerged to promote political awareness and mobilization among Brazilians (De Sousa e Silva, 2019).

Similarly, in India, political participation is characterized by a vibrant democracy with extensive grassroots engagement. With the largest democratic electorate in the world, India has witnessed varied trends in voter turnout across different regions and elections. For example, the 2019 general election saw a record-breaking turnout of approximately 67.1%, reflecting widespread participation in the electoral process (Election Commission of India, 2019). However, challenges such as voter disenfranchisement, electoral fraud, and political violence persist, affecting the quality and inclusivity of political participation (Banerjee, 2018). Despite these challenges, civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and digital platforms have played crucial roles in mobilizing citizens, fostering political dialogue, and advocating for democratic reforms in India.

In Latin American economies, political participation reflects a diverse array of socio-political landscapes shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional factors. For example, in Mexico, voter

turnout has seen fluctuations over time, influenced by factors such as electoral reforms and political mobilization efforts. In the 2018 presidential election, voter turnout reached approximately 63.4%, marking a significant increase compared to previous elections (INE, 2018). Despite this, challenges such as voter disillusionment, electoral fraud, and political violence persist, impacting the credibility and inclusivity of the electoral process (Gonzalez-Ocantos, 2018). Furthermore, limited access to education and information, as well as socio-economic inequalities, can hinder broader engagement in political discussions and activism among Mexicans. However, civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and digital platforms continue to play vital roles in promoting political awareness, fostering public debate, and mobilizing citizens for active participation in Mexico's democracy.

Similarly, in Brazil, political participation is characterized by a complex interplay of democratic achievements and socio-political challenges. While Brazil has experienced high voter turnout in general elections, reaching approximately 79.7% in 2018 (International IDEA, 2020), issues such as corruption, political polarization, and socio-economic disparities have influenced the quality and inclusivity of political participation. Moreover, instances of electoral fraud, voter intimidation, and violence have raised concerns about the integrity of the electoral process (De Sousa e Silva, 2019). Despite these challenges, civil society organizations, social movements, and digital platforms have emerged as critical actors in promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, advocating for electoral reforms, and mobilizing citizens for political participation in Brazil.

In sub-Saharan African economies, political participation often faces multifaceted challenges arising from factors such as historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, and governance issues. For instance, in Nigeria, despite being Africa's most populous democracy, voter turnout has varied widely across elections. The 2019 general election saw a turnout of approximately 35.7%, reflecting a decline compared to previous elections (International IDEA, 2020). Challenges such as voter apathy, electoral irregularities, and security concerns have contributed to fluctuations in turnout rates and impacted the credibility of the electoral process (Ukiwo, 2018). Moreover, limited access to education and information, as well as cultural and ethnic divisions, can hinder broader engagement in political discussions and activism among Nigerians. Nevertheless, civil society organizations and grassroots movements have emerged to address these challenges, advocating for electoral reforms, promoting voter education, and mobilizing citizens for political participation (Ukiwo, 2018).

Similarly, in South Africa, political participation has evolved since the end of apartheid, marked by significant progress in democratic consolidation. Despite notable achievements, voter turnout in recent elections has seen a gradual decline. In the 2019 general election, voter turnout stood at approximately 66%, reflecting a decrease compared to previous elections (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2019). Challenges such as political disillusionment, socio-economic inequalities, and corruption have contributed to voter disengagement and apathy. Additionally, issues such as voter registration barriers and logistical challenges in rural areas have affected the inclusivity of the electoral process (Fakir & Qobo, 2017). Nonetheless, civil society organizations, media outlets, and digital platforms continue to play crucial roles in promoting political awareness,

fostering public debate, and mobilizing citizens for active participation in South Africa's democracy.

Social media usage, encompassing both frequency and intensity, plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' engagement in political processes. First, individuals who engage in frequent and intense social media usage, characterized by spending significant time on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, are more likely to exhibit heightened political participation. Research suggests that individuals who use social media frequently tend to be more politically active, participating in activities such as voting, engaging in political discussions, and taking part in activism (Valenzuela, 2021). Moreover, the intensity of social media usage, indicated by factors like the amount of time spent on platforms per day and the level of interaction with political content, further amplifies the likelihood of political engagement among users. This heightened engagement can manifest in various forms, including increased voter turnout during elections and greater involvement in online and offline political discussions (Vitak, 2015).

On the other hand, individuals who exhibit infrequent and low-intensity social media usage are likely to display lower levels of political participation. Such users may have limited exposure to political content and discussions on social media platforms, which can diminish their motivation to engage in political activities (Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). Furthermore, infrequent and low-intensity social media users may miss out on opportunities for information sharing, mobilization, and collective action, thereby reducing their likelihood of participating in political processes such as voting and activism. Thus, understanding the nuanced relationship between social media usage patterns and political participation is crucial for elucidating the mechanisms through which digital technologies influence democratic engagement in contemporary societies (Barberá, 2015).

Problem Statement

The pervasive integration of social media platforms into the fabric of American society has fundamentally altered the landscape of political participation. However, amidst the proliferation of digital communication channels, a pressing concern emerges regarding the extent to which social media usage influences citizens' engagement in political processes. Recent research underscores the complex interplay between social media dynamics and political behavior, raising questions about the nature and implications of this relationship (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). While some studies suggest that social media facilitates political engagement by providing avenues for information sharing and mobilization (Valenzuela, 2017), others highlight its potential to exacerbate political polarization and the spread of misinformation (Guess, 2019). Furthermore, disparities in access to and usage of social media among different demographic groups pose challenges to the inclusivity and representativeness of online political discourse (Barberá, 2015). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media usage on political participation is imperative for informing policy interventions and civic initiatives aimed at promoting informed and inclusive democratic engagement in the digital age.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital Theory

Originated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and further developed by Robert Putnam, social capital theory explores the importance of social connections and networks in facilitating cooperation and achieving collective goals within a society. In the context of social media and political participation, this theory suggests that social media platforms serve as avenues for individuals to build and maintain social capital by connecting with others who share similar political interests or ideologies. Higher levels of social capital generated through online interactions may lead to increased political engagement and participation among users (Putnam, 2000).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Developed by communication scholars Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, the uses and gratifications theory posits that individuals actively choose media to fulfill specific needs or desires. Applied to social media and political participation, this theory suggests that people engage with social media platforms for political purposes based on their personal motivations, such as seeking information, expressing opinions, or connecting with like-minded individuals. Understanding the various gratifications individuals derive from social media usage can shed light on their political behaviors and activities on these platforms (Katz, 1973).

Digital Divide Theory

The digital divide theory examines disparities in access to and use of digital technologies based on socio-economic factors such as income, education, and geographic location. Originating from research by scholars like William Wresch and Jan van Dijk, this theory is relevant to the study of social media and political participation in the United States as it highlights how inequalities in access to social media platforms may influence political engagement. Understanding how the digital divide affects political participation can inform efforts to address disparities and ensure more inclusive political discourse online (Van Dijk, 2006).

Empirical Review

Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) investigated the relationship between social media usage and political engagement among college students. They conducted a survey-based study, gathering data on students' social media habits and their levels of political participation. The findings of the study revealed a significant positive correlation between the frequency of social media use and various forms of political engagement. Specifically, students who reported spending more time on social media platforms were more likely to engage in political discussions, participate in offline political activities, and express interest in political issues. This led the researchers to conclude that social media could serve as a valuable tool for mobilizing young adults for civic participation and political engagement. As a recommendation, they suggested that educators and policymakers should consider leveraging social media platforms to reach and engage with young voters, recognizing the potential of these platforms to influence political attitudes and behaviors among college students.

Lee and Jang (2014) investigated the role of social media in political participation among Korean citizens. Their research involved surveying a representative sample of Korean adults to assess their social media usage patterns and levels of political engagement. The findings of the study indicated a positive association between social media use and political participation, particularly among younger age groups and individuals with higher levels of education. This suggested that social media platforms played a significant role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors among Korean citizens. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that policymakers and political candidates should consider leveraging social media platforms to communicate with and mobilize voters, especially among the younger demographic, recognizing the potential of these platforms to influence political participation in South Korea.

Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) explored the impact of social media usage on political participation and attitudes in Spain. They conducted a longitudinal survey analysis, collecting data from Spanish adults over time to examine changes in social media use and political engagement. The results of the study revealed a positive correlation between social media usage and political participation, including voting behavior and engagement in political discussions. This suggested that social media platforms played a significant role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors among Spanish citizens. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that efforts should be made to foster the use of social media platforms to enhance political engagement and democratic participation in Spain, recognizing the potential of these platforms to mobilize citizens for civic involvement.

Bode and Dalrymple (2016) investigated the impact of social media on political polarization in the United States, particularly during the 2016 presidential election. Their research involved analyzing Twitter data to examine the prevalence of echo chambers and exposure to diverse viewpoints among users. The findings of the study indicated high levels of political polarization on Twitter, with users primarily exposed to content that aligned with their ideological preferences. This suggested that social media platforms played a role in reinforcing political polarization and ideological divisions among users. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that social media users should actively seek out diverse viewpoints and engage with individuals who hold different political beliefs, recognizing the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives in mitigating political polarization.

Vaccari (2015) assessed the role of social media in shaping political behavior and attitudes in the United States. Their research involved collecting data from American adults over time to examine the relationship between social media usage and various forms of political engagement. The findings of the study indicated a positive correlation between social media usage and political participation, including voting behavior and engagement in political discussions. However, the study also found that social media usage was correlated with increased exposure to political polarization and misinformation. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that efforts should be made to promote digital literacy and critical thinking skills among social media users, recognizing the importance of media literacy in navigating political discourse effectively and discerning credible information from misinformation.

Barnidge and Rojas (2016) explored the relationship between social media usage and political efficacy among Latino immigrants in the United States. Their research involved conducting

qualitative interviews with Latino immigrants to examine their social media habits and perceptions of political efficacy. The findings of the study indicated that social media positively influenced political efficacy among Latino immigrants, providing them with access to political information and resources. This suggested that social media platforms played a significant role in empowering marginalized communities and enhancing their political engagement. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that efforts should be made to leverage the potential of social media to mobilize Latino immigrants for civic participation and political engagement, recognizing the importance of inclusive digital spaces in promoting democratic participation among marginalized communities.

Stier and Bleier (2017) investigated the impact of social media on political participation in Germany. Their research involved surveying a representative sample of German adults to assess their social media usage patterns and levels of political engagement. The findings of the study revealed mixed effects of social media usage on political participation, with some users becoming more politically active while others disengaged from politics. This suggested that the relationship between social media usage and political behavior was complex and nuanced. As a recommendation, the researchers suggested that further research should be conducted to understand the mechanisms underlying the relationship between social media usage and political participation in Germany, recognizing the need for tailored approaches to leveraging social media platforms for political engagement in different contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The relationship between social media usage and political participation in the United States is multifaceted and dynamic, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges inherent in digital communication platforms. While social media has undoubtedly democratized access to political information and facilitated new forms of civic engagement, it also poses significant risks to the quality of political discourse and the inclusivity of public deliberation. Recent research underscores the importance of understanding the complex interplay between social media dynamics and political behavior, highlighting the need for nuanced interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of online echo chambers, misinformation, and algorithmic biases. Moreover, efforts to promote digital literacy and media literacy are crucial for empowering citizens to critically evaluate information encountered on social media platforms and participate

meaningfully in democratic processes. As social media continues to evolve and shape the political landscape, policymakers, educators, and technology developers must collaborate to foster a digital environment that promotes informed, inclusive, and deliberative political participation. By addressing the challenges posed by social media usage while leveraging its potential for civic empowerment, we can work towards a more resilient and vibrant democracy in the United States.

Recommendations

Theory

Advances our understanding of the role of digital literacy in mitigating the negative effects of social media on political participation, contributing to theories of media literacy and democratic engagement. Advances theories of online deliberation and democratic communication by exploring strategies for creating inclusive digital spaces that accommodate diverse voices and perspectives. Contributes to theories of digital governance and platform regulation by exploring the potential impact of regulatory interventions on social media dynamics and political participation.

Practice

Provides practical tools and strategies for individuals to navigate the digital landscape effectively, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry. Offers practical guidance for online communities, social media platforms, and civil society organizations seeking to promote inclusive dialogue and reduce polarization in online political discourse. Provides guidance for policymakers and regulators on effective strategies for addressing the negative externalities associated with social media platforms while preserving freedom of expression and democratic values.

Policy

Encourages policymakers to prioritize investments in digital literacy education as part of broader efforts to promote civic engagement and democratic resilience. Highlights the importance of policies that incentivize platforms to prioritize features and algorithms that promote diversity of viewpoints and constructive engagement, thus fostering a healthier online public sphere. Advocates for evidence-based policies that strike a balance between regulatory oversight and platform innovation, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the online information ecosystem and promoting responsible platform behavior.

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