

Social Media and Youth Online Political Participation: Perspectives on Cognitive Engagement.

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Abstract

The role of social media in political participation cannot be overstated as sites like Facebook and Twitter have provided new avenues for political engagement. Yet, concerns for declining participation among youths has led to increased research in this area. Unfortunately, conflicting results have emerged from such researches, perhaps due to lack of proper theorization of the concept of youth online political participation on social media. Hence, the Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET) will be used as underpinning in the paper. CET from the perspective of online political participation on social media embodies two separate trend. First, is the decrease in the cost of acquiring information; and second, the increase in youth's ability to process political information which in turn enhances participation. This means that youths will have more political resources allowing them to deal with political issues and understand how democracy works in their society. Consequently, using CET has helped to clarify differing results as it contain variables such as access to political information on social media, political knowledge, political interest and policy satisfaction which better explains the concept of youth online political participation on social media, hence decreasing the inconsistencies experienced in previous researches.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Political Participation, Cognitive Engagement Theory, Youths.

1. Introduction

Digital technology has made it possible for global social media use within the realm of politics (Valenzuela, 2013), education, business and international relations (Olabamiji, 2014). In the past, demographics and psychological factors determine political participation, however today, evidence suggests that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays an equally important role. Consequently, social media has been adopted as tools for online political participation.

However, concerns for declining participation among citizens (Chun, 2012; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2011; Ogochukwu, 2014; Putnam, 2000) has led to increased research in this area. The focus of this concern has been on youths as surveys have shown this group is particularly apathetic to political life (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; David, 2013; Theorcharis & Quintelier, 2014; Ward & Vreese, 2011; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2013). However, while some researches (Seongyi & Woo-Young, 2011; Whiteley, 2011) have found that there is a decrease in youth political participation, others (Chun, 2012; Potgieter, 2013) reported that there is a steady rise in youth's participation in politics through social media. These conflicting results indicate that there are two paradigms (participation and non-participation) to youth's engagement in politics.

Additionally, Wojcieszak (2012) have observed that researches in the area of social media and online political participation are not well theorized. Some studies have used the social capital theory (Gibson, 2000; Gil de Zuniga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012; Mann, 2011; Waren, Sulaiman & Gafar, 2014), civic voluntarism model (Charles, 2010; Mann, 2011) and uses and gratification theory (Chan, 2012; Kenneth, 2012; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Yet, these researches have led to conflicting results on youth online political participation.

Consequently, scholars have advocated for a new approach in theorizing researches on social media and online political participation. Bae (2014) for example, has argued that political participation on social media have moved beyond the uses and gratification approach. Hence, Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, and Lampe (2011) recommended a look into social media use for political participation from a cognitive engagement perspective. As a result, this paper intends to explain at youths' online political participation on social media within the framework of CET.

2. Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET)

The concept of cognitive engagement is the extent to which individuals are willing and able to learn about politics which eventually leads to participation. It involves the amount of efforts youths are willing to invest in seeking to participate in politics and also how long they persist in doing so (Charles, 2010).

The Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET) was propounded by Ronald F. Inglehart in 1977 as Cognitive Mobilization Theory (Alaminos & Panalva, 2012; Dalton, 1984). At the time, cognitive mobilization theory basically meant political participation is affected by better educated youths who have increased access to information (Inglehart, 1977; 1990). Thus, the core of CET is that political participation is the product of an individual's education, access to information, political knowledge, political interest and policy satisfaction

(Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004).

Education refers to whether individuals have more than the minimum levels of education, especially higher education. Access to information refers to how individuals use media to get political information. Political interest encompasses what propels youths to follow activities of government and to understand policy-making. Political knowledge entails their understanding of the way the system works, while policy satisfaction is about policy information which is relevant to making a decision about participation (Whiteley, 2005).

Hence the more educated youths a society has, the better informed they will be and in the long run the more they will participate in politics to show their satisfaction with government policies. Also the lesser the cost of access to information the more youths consume information from the media and the higher the level of political knowledge and interest among youths which further leads to increased political participation (Charles, 2010).

However, like every theory, CET also has its criticisms. According to Pattie, Seyd and Whitely (2004), a major criticism of CET is that, as a choice-based theory that involves information processing, it does not take cognizance of the fact that individuals might decide not to act on political information once they have acquired it, especially with the absence of incentives. Furthermore, it is still unclear on why educated people should be willing to act on media information once they have got it. Better education may represent better cognitive ability but it cannot be directly translated into an automatic interest in politics. Thus, even if individuals are well educated and politically interested, they may still need some resources for participation.

2.1. Choice Conceptions of Cognitive Engagement Theory

The CET is rooted in choice conceptions of participation rather than structural conceptions of Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM). As a result, rather than participating in politics due to an individual's social characteristics, cognitively engaged citizens do so in terms of the choices which they make about involvement (Whiteley, 2005). Hence, choice conceptions means that individuals make conscious choices about political participation. Possibly, this explains why Pattie, Seyd and Whitely (2004) noted that cognitively engaged citizens are critical citizens, who if are not satisfied by government policies mobilizes them to engage in unconventional (i.e online political participation) forms of political participation. Nevertheless, they could also decide not to participate in politics at all due to their dissatisfaction with government policies.

Consequently, cognitive engagement results from an individual's access to information and his ability and willingness to use that information to make informed choices. Historically, cognitively engaged citizens are the good citizens who have interest in politics and know how democracy works. They are critical citizens who are propelled to participate in politics if they are not satisfied with government policies (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003).

2.2. Arguments on Education as a Factor of Cognitive Engagement Theory

Education as a variable of CET has generated a lot of doubts concerning its role in political participation. As a result, a lot of criticism has surrounds its inclusion as the most important factor that enhances political participation. Accordingly, the author of the theory (Inglehart) noted that education as a variable might not be particularly useful in some cases (Inglehart, 1990). Similarly, Whiteley (2005) added that, proper control of other variables such as political interest may eliminate the relationship between education and political knowledge. Hence education may be taking credit for the impact of other factors.

Although Dalton (2008) claims increase in political participation is driven by growth in civic education, yet, Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert (2009) contend that access to information can also play this roles as it provides an important backdrop for youths' cognitive development. Moreover, Whiteley (2005) stressed that the aim of civic education in democratic engagement is more towards civic engagement than political participation. Besides civic education does not ultimately lead to political knowledge which propels individuals to political participation and political knowledge is only useful if it motivates participation.

On a similar note, the knowledge gained through civic education is not prioritized in political participation in the digital age, rather it is current knowledge gained via frequent exposure to social media (Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014). This current knowledge acquired through media is an important motivation for political participation. Therefore, youth's participation depends on their access to information on social media, and this information is what eventually leads to knowledge that is useful to make informed political choices.

Evidently, improvement in standards of education does not necessarily improve political participation. Moreover, Whiteley (2005) reported that some studies have found that students of higher education were already knowledgeable about politics in the beginning, indicating that civic education makes no difference. Apparently, there is no link or a weak link between civic education and political knowledge, signifying that political knowledge is usually acquired outside the school.

Therefore, even though education may appear to be the single most important factor in understanding

varying levels of political information, however, other factors also play an equally important role. Although the cognitive engagement theory has a normative rules that good youths must be educated, interested in politics and media-conscious, it still places emphasis on the important role of media use in building political knowledge and interest which will increase political participation.

3. Youth Online Political Participation and Cognitive Engagement Theory

Online political participation is basically political participation that takes place on the Internet. They are digital modes of participation which are categorized as non-conventional form of political participation. These nonconventional (also known as non-electoral or non-institutional) forms of participation have been on the increase since the last decade (Shore, 2014). This has led to the emergence of a variety of activities now referred to as political participation thus making the democratic experience more diverse.

Today, several features of social media can be used for various forms of online political participation both in direct (instant messaging, messages and wall postings) and indirect ways (posting notes, status update) (Vitak et al., 2011; Warren, Sulaiman & Jafar, 2014). Specifically, some political activities that exist through standard Facebook features are, posting political messages on a personal or friends' wall, sharing political opinion, joining political groups, becoming a fan of political candidates by liking their pages, and posting comment on friends post about politics (Vitak, et al., 2011). Obviously, Facebook duplicates direct forms of traditional participation in which many real-world participation activities take place online (Warren, Sulaiman & Jafar, 2014).

The same can also be said for twitter where political participation include such activities as posting political tweets, retweeting or quoting political tweets, following politicians, political parties or political Twitter accounts, and also replying tweets from these groups (Valenzuela, 2013).

Consequently, since social media is part of youth political culture (Olabamiji, 2014), the relationship between youth online political participation and CET can be established. This is because factors of CET (access to political information, political knowledge, political interest and policy satisfaction) can best be used to describe youths' online political participation on social media.

Holding that thought, although CET was propounded in 1977, Dalton (2006) noted that there is renewed interest in the theory due to the reduction in cost of accessing political information brought about by improved technology. One of such improved technology today is social media. More so, Inglehart (1977) highlighted the significance of unconventional forms of political participation at the time he propounded the theory. In fact, Aliminos and Penalva (2012) affirm that in CET, conventional forms of political participation has been relegated to the background as unconventional forms have taken over due to post materialistic values. Today, online political participation on social media is a part of such unconventional forms of political participation.

Furthermore, Charles (2010) noted that political participation is associated with an individual's access to information, political interest and political knowledge, while Vincente and Novo (2014) added that there are connections between political participation and youth's policy satisfaction. Also, Smith and Raine (2008) discovered that during the 2008 election in the US, 40% of all social media users use it to find out their friends political interest, 29% to see their friends political affiliations and 22% for political information (especially information about candidates).

Consequently, further clarification of the relationship between individual factors of CET and online political participation are as follows:

3.1 Access to information

Access to information is *sine qua non* in a democracy because knowledgeable youths who are well informed are those who participate in politics. Social media plays an important role in this endeavor for a variety of reasons. Most importantly is that it exposes youths to political information hence providing a tool for participation (Gil De Zuniga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014). Additionally, it offers variety of options for political engagement and also lowers the cost of participation significantly both in terms of time and effort. Furthermore, they provide opportunity for interactivity between political elite and youths albeit mediated while at the same time making the political system seem more accessible to citizens (Bah, 2004; Engesser & Franzetti, 2011; Odunlami, 2014; Teng, 2012; Wojcieszak, 2012).

Accordingly, a major attribute of social media is the choice which it offers individuals to access political information they like bypassing the gatekeeper role of traditional media (Policy and Legal Advocacy Center, 2011). Supporting this, Bae (2014) noted that, given the high level of penetration of political information on social media and the limited control over the flow of information on it, youths can encounter politically engaging information while carrying out various apolitical activities on social media.

Likewise, studies (Bae, 2014; Moy et al., 2005; Olabamiji, 2014; Potgieter, 2013; Verba et al. 1995) have shown overtime that political participation can stem from access to political information. Therefore, the more exposed youths are to news and information about politics, the more they will participate in politics (Bae,

2014).

Nevertheless, this relationship could also be vice versa when youths are disappointed with the information they get. For instance, it is possible that large amount of political information available on social media may not even propel individuals to participate in politics actively. In fact, Olabamiji (2014) believes abundant amount of political information on social media may even make youths apathetic to politics. However, Rahmawati (2014) argued that there is lack of empirical evidence to back this negative relationship.

It is noteworthy however that despite the fact that youths rely on net for political information, the lack of professional monitoring system to authenticate the content of information online has made it difficult to trust the validity of such information. The issue is particularly challenging in the social media environment where multiple sources are involved in the communication process. Such multiple sources of information as the net are harmful as their level for credibility cannot be ascertained. Hence, it is believed that the more users trust the source and motives of political information the more likely they would engage in politics (Bae, 2014).

Similarly, in a study on the degree to which youths trust political information on social media, Johnson and Kaye (2014) found that social media was ranked the least credible among nine other sources of political news examined. Perhaps, due to the ease and convenience of posting political information and news on social media, it is often not filtered through professional gatekeepers. This puts the burden of determining credibility more on the users.

3.2. Political Knowledge

Political knowledge as a cognition reflects an intellectual capacity attained through a process of political learning (Moy, Torres, Tanaka & McCluskey, 2005). Hence, it can be referred to as a group of actual political information stored in the long-term memory of an individual. It can be gained through interpersonal discussion about politics (Wells & Dudash, 2007), traditional news media consumption and Internet (Kenski & Stroud, 2006) or exposure to political information on social media (Rahmawati, 2014).

Obviously, most political knowledge acquired in the digital age is through social media and not formal education. Besides, Whiteley (2005) explained that typical measure of political knowledge which counts years of formal education have been rejected by some scholars. Moreover, in this digital age individuals with little information can overcome their information shortfalls by looking to knowledgeable friends and acquaintances within their social network for information. Equally, Wells and Dudash (2007) noted that knowledge about politics comes largely from the media, but can also be gotten through ones social network family or interpersonal interaction. Also Fraile (2011) discovered that the relationship between education and political knowledge are weak among individuals more exposed to the media for political information. Just as Shaker (2009) and Valenzuela (2013) also found that frequent access to information is positively related to political participation because it increases users' political knowledge which motivates participation.

Therefore, media is one of the major channels of political learning, hence it plays an important role in facilitating political participation (Banducci et al., 2009; Pasek, Kenski, Romer & Jamieson, 2006; Teng, 2012). Consequently, findings from researches about the potential of access to information and political knowledge is multifaceted (Fraile, 2011). First, is the idea that low quality of information provided by media decreases youth political knowledge and interest which eventually affects participation. This is known as the *media malaise thesis*. Second, is the idea that media exposure increases political knowledge (Norris, 2000) which is known as the *virtuous circle thesis*, and third is the *effects thesis* which indicates that some media have positive effect while others have negative effect on political knowledge.

Regardless of these theses, Vreese and Boomgarden (2006) believe that youths' political knowledge and participation in politics are very important to the democratic process. As a result, political knowledge is a strong predictor of political participation (Charles, 2010) hence, a decline in political knowledge is partly to blame for the decline in participation (O'Neil, 2006). Inherently, those who know more about politics are more likely to participate politically.

3.3. Political Interest

Political interest provides the motivation required to devote significant time and energy to participate in politics (O'Neil, 2006). This is because it propels individuals to acquire political information that can assist in assessing political alternatives (O'Neil, 2006). Therefore, political participation is driven by interest in politics (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Hur & Kwon, 2014; Shepperd, 2012).

Accordingly, Kruike-meier, Noort, Vliegenthart and De Vresse (2013), and Oser, Hooghe and Marien (2012) maintain that political interest is often a strong predictor of political participation because it tells whether an individual will be politically active or passive. Therefore, youths who are more interested in politics are willing to pay more attention to political content in media hence more likely to participate in politics and vice versa (Bae, 2014).

Similarly, Bae, (2014) and Sheppard (2012) have found that social media positively influences political

interest and subsequently political participation. Also, scholars (Boulianne, 2011; Hur & Kwon, 2014) have noted that there is a positive relationship between political interest and use of media for acquiring political information. Youths get political information through online network of friends which may lead to political interest. As a result, social media users promote political interest and makes people in their network likely to participate in politics.

3.4 Policy Satisfaction

Policy satisfaction embodies a wide variety of issues ranging from economic, political, or social. Thus, policy satisfaction in a democracy bothers on governments role on issues like press freedom, protection of minority groups or accessibility to judicial system (Shore, 2014).

Accordingly, policy satisfaction is a fundamental democratic value. Therefore, in a democracy, the major policy a government should pursue is one which will transform the lives of its citizen's youths positively. Yet for this to happen, their voices need to be heard on various issues of policy importance. In the past this could be done via traditional media, however today social media has taken over this role. Social media provides a direct link between the public and government (Johnson & Kaye, 2014) such that they are now used to engage in political activities that affect policy (Valenzuela, Kim & Gil de Zuniga, 2012).

As a result, participation of youths in policy making is imperative in a democracy. It is through this participation that they communicate information regarding policy preferences and concern to policy makers (Potgieter, 2013; Verba et al., 1995) and vice versa. This shows that social media has a significant role to play in policy satisfaction.

4. Conclusion

For several years, scholars have attempted to understand better the relationship between youth online political participation and social media. This paper has helped in the understanding of such relationship. Using CET to explain youth online political participation has provided a better alternative to theories used in other researches where conflicting results emerged. This is because variables of CET can appropriately explain the phenomenon of youth online political participation on social media. Therefore, it is clear that online political participation via social media makes involvement in politics easier, far less expensive and by extension an extra boost to cognitive engagement. This indicates the suitable applicability of CET to youth online political participation on social media.

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