Use of Social Networking Media in Political Participation: A Study on Dhaka University Students

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Abstract The role of social networking websites (SNWs) on offline political activities has gained currency in recent days. This study aims to explore the dynamics of relationship between users of social networking websites and their political participation. A cross-sectional survey was conducted on 110 students in the University of Dhaka. The empirical study focuses on evaluating whether there is relationship or not between SNWs and offline political participation in different respects. The use of SNWs contributes to boosting consciousness about political activity and political awareness. It also studies to find association between time span used up in SNWs and participation in offline political activities. This study concludes that some specific activities in SNWs have role to develop the level of participation in political activities.

Keywords Social Network, Social Networking Websites, Political Participation

1. Introduction

Social networking website, including Facebook, is the most popular social networking platform in Bangladesh with 18 million active accounts (Daily Star, 29 December, 2015). Around 40% of the world populations have accessibility to internet connection today in which only 7% among total population of 160 million have availability and accessibility to use internet in Bangladesh (World Development Report, 2016). Social media including Facebook, blog, and twitter, creates more activism and social movements in present time reflected in political engagement. The use of social networking sites is growing at unbelievable rates amongst both young and experienced citizens (Martin & Schmeisser, 2008) [19] and supporting to this, Boyd explores that majority of youth and teenagers utilize social networking sites. Social networking websites contribute to maintaining preexisting social networks as well as helping connect with

strangers based on shared interests, political views or any other activities (Boyd and Ellison 2008). [5]

Stressing the impact of the proliferation of personal media — devices and their connection to social media channels Ben Calder (2013) noted that “Social media based social relationships in the modern world has been the subject of a significant amount of research” [7]. In this connection, social media websites enhances platforms on the Internet where people interact freely, share and discuss information and ideas on personal and various socio-political issues using combination of verbal, pictorial and audio-visual expression. SNWs users are not only “networking” or looking to meet unknown people but also are primarily communicating with known people among their extended social network. Most importantly Facebook allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep connecting with friends, family and colleagues that help political mobilization. Twitter as a popular micro blogging social site plays significant role in political enlistment through information transmission. Concurrently blogging and email account generate political environment by sending political information to their supporters and well-wishers in order to build protest movement.

It is stated that there is a moderate and positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students' life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation and political engagement (Valenzuela and Kee, 2008) [33]. There is an alternative claim that Internet use does not have an effect on the propensity to participate in public life (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008) [27]. From this conflicting claim, doubt raised whether social networking websites contribute to participating in political activities or not. For instance, through using Facebook, blog (Rabbani, 2014) [28] *Shahbag* movement influenced the protest by disseminating specific types of information (Zamir, 2014) [37] and enriched participants through using social networking websites (Curtis, 2015) [11]. This paper initiates to understand the relationship between using of social networking websites and political participation among Dhaka University students.

2. Impact of Social Networking Media on Political Participation

Mass media are the most important sources of political information, which is identified as an important source of political engagement (Pasek et al., 2006) [23]. The demand for flexibility in defining issues and constructing a political identity has led to the framing of participation based on a more personal, individualistic expression of political action (Calder, 2013) [7]. But there is a debate among the social media researchers on the issue of positive or negative impact of social media on political participation. Few researchers showed positive relationship and other proved as negative. As an example, different patterns of Internet use have different effects (e.g., positive or negative) on the level of political engagement. Solop (2000) similarly argued that younger people are more likely to vote online than the older voters [29]. De Vreese (2007) demonstrated that many internet activities are positively related to different dimensions of civic and political participation [13]. Furthermore Boyd and Ellison (2008) observed that most of the SNWs contribute to maintaining pre-existing social networks as well as helping connect with strangers based on shared interests, political views, or activities [5]. On the other hand, use of social media has a negative impact on social and political participation (Putnam, 2000) [26]. This view stresses that the more time people spend online, the more contact they lose with their social environment and the less time they spend to meet their friends and family (Nie, 2002) [22].

Vitak, Smock, Ellison and Lampe (2009) conducted an online random sample survey on 683, Undergraduate students at Midwestern university in U.S.A. on the topic of “Poking people to participate: Facebook and Political Participation in the 2008 Election” [34]. They concluded that political activity in Facebook is significantly associated with political participation. Smith (2013) also examined a telephone interviewed survey on sample of 2,253 adults among English and Spanish people finding that individuals who are politically active on social networking websites are also highly active in offline spaces, and those who are politically active offline tend to have relatively high rates of engagement in social networking spaces [30]. Another web survey of college students in Texas (n = 2,603) reveals moderate relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students' life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation and political engagement (Valenzuela and Kee, 2008) [33]. By contrast, Quintellier & Vissers (2008) clearly argued that spending time in online has no significant role in political participation. They conducted a survey on a representative sample of 6,330 in Belgium and analyzed time spent on the internet and various activities performed online [27]. They found that timeline on the internet does not have an effect on the propensity to participate in public life. But it is important to state that some online activities are clearly and significantly associated with offline political participation. In

addition, Manteau (2015) analyzed an online sample survey of 130 Romanian young people on the topic of “The Impact of Social Media Use of Political Participation” and expressed concluding result that online political participation didn't persuade offline politics [20].

3. Theoretical Framework

Political sociologist Manuel Castells formed a theory on network society which stated the recent transformation in society as well as changing sociability and forms of social interaction through social network, as individuals are connected with each other by self-selection network which is called socialized communication [9]. Castells (2005) claimed that social media based socialized communications are essential in the formation of consciousness and attitude as well as political decision building [9]. In this context, social network theory emphasizes socialized communication system which is constructed by social networking media that are based on sharing feelings and audio-visual expression. This theory expresses that the electronic hypertext makes horizontal networks of autonomous communication that emerged in the local and global arena strengthening the power of network society in the real world social network [8]. That's why Castells (2005) said that “Internet users are more social, have more friends and contacts and are more socially and politically active.....” Castells believes that media is important for building political hegemony or counter hegemony ensuring political participation that shapes political process through socialized communication. In addition to that, Castells (2005) commented that “the more they (users of SNWs) use the internet, the more they also engage in face-to-face interaction in all domains of their lives”. [9]

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study

Castells's ideas are slightly different from media dependency theory stressing that social networking overall makes people politically active. Baran and Davis(2006) proposed the main proposition of media systems dependency theory as “the more a person depends on having needs gratified by media use, the more important the media's role will be in the person's life, and therefore the more influence

those media will have[2]. Ball-Rokech and DeFleur (1976) argued that the greater the media dependency in connection with a particular message, the greater the likelihood that the message will alter audience cognitions, feelings, and behaviors [1]. The dependency theory model might also help us to understand the theory of media determinism developed by Marshall McLuhan (1964). He wrote "The effects of technology don't occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance." [21]

According to technological determinists, particular technical developments, communications technologies or media, or, most broadly, technology in general are the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. Technological determinists believe that "'You can't stop progress', implying that we are unable to control technology" (Green, 2001) [15]. Technological determinism seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology as a whole, as the key mover in history and social change (Kunz, 2006) [18]. Technological determinism has been summarized as 'The belief in technology as a key governing force in society ...' (Smith, 1994) [31]. In this regard, Postman pointed out the functional role of information media as:

The printing press, the computer, and television are not therefore simply machines which convey information. They are metaphors through which we conceptualize reality in one way or another. They will classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, and argue a case for what it is like. Through these media metaphors, we do not see the world as it is. We see it as our coding systems are. Such is the power of the form of information. (Postman, 1992) [25]

One of the best examples of technological determinism in media theory is Marshall McLuhan's theory "the medium is the message". According to McLuhan, there is an association between communications media/technology and language; similarly, Benjamin Lee Whorf argued that language shapes our perception of thinking (linguistic determinism). Harold Innis (1951) believed that the social, cultural, political, and economic developments of each historical period can be related directly to the technology of the means of mass communication of that period [17]. Harold Innis's analysis of the effects of communications on the rise and fall of empires led him to warn grimly that western civilization is now facing its own profound crisis as an instance western civilization suffered from an "obsession with present-mindedness" that eliminated concerns about past or future [17]. By contrast, Raymond Williams (1974) criticized media determinism and rather believed social movements define technological and media processes. [35]

In contrast, with the technological deterministic approach, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) introduced Networked Individualism theory that explored public engagement,

policy focus, and mass media offering looser organizational affiliations, and coalitions that presented a more rigid protest framework with fewer social media platforms [4]. Rather than a collective appeal for individuals to take action for one particular reason, the online protest offered 'a rainbow of reasons to act' including threats to business and innovation, invasion of privacy, opening up vulnerabilities of the internet, and threats to jobs(Bennett,2012). [3]

In relation to Networked Individualism theory, Social Media's Political Approach implies that in a modern political landscape characterized by the rise of individualism and personalized participation repertoires, people are retreating to the private sphere, resorting to social media activity for their dose of political action — a means of communication which is built on 'mutual privatism' (Fenton and Barrassi, 2011) [14]. According to this approach, within social media networks, with their emphasis on self-empowerment, there is potentially little concern for broader political and social contexts. These contexts involve the dominant framings of acceptable political action and social organization as well as the broader positioning of political activity within neoliberal discourse (Fenton and Barassi, 2011) [14]. Similarly, Ronald F. Inglehart(1977) constructed Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET) that stresses individuals' will power and learning ability about politics which eventually leads to participation in politics with the efforts of youths[16]. At the time, cognitive mobilization theory basically meant political participation is affected by better educated youths who have increased access to information (Inglehart, 1977[16]). 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. It noted that political participation is associated with an individual's access to information, political interest and political knowledge exploring that 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 . [16]

Apart from that, Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) developed by G. DeSanctis and M. Scott Poole (1994) implies the importance of influential, informational social exchange between politicians and users of social networking sites. The core premise of the AST is the idea that advanced information technologies, like social networking sites, enable multiparty participation and exchange in organizational activities through sophisticated information management (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994) [12]. The AST proposes that this relationship between society and technology, or system and structure, is a two-sided exchange that leads society to a response or "movement" (Turner, 1986). [32]

Another significant theory named 'Political Information Efficacy' has been developed to make confidence in their political knowledge as social media is the best medium to examine young people trends on searching political

information (Pollock, 1983) [24]. Besides that, digital media use is positively associated with political discourse for those lower in political interest (Bruce Bimber, 2014) [6]. An additional complicated theory like Hybrid Media System theory highly focused on the communication networks that were served by the Occupy movement existed in a 'hybrid media system'. Chadwick writes about media hybridity, politics, and power, arguing that a holistic approach to the role played by communication and information in politics is necessary; 'one that avoids exclusively focusing either on supposedly "new" or supposedly "old" media' and hence a hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics (Chadwick, 2013). [10]

4. Study Design and Methods

4.1. Study Region and Sampling Procedure

Dhaka University has been taken purposively as the study location for data collection as it is claimed that respondents of Dhaka University are more politically sensitive than others. Dhaka University was established in 1921 which is the largest public university in Bangladesh, with a student body of 33,000 and a faculty of 1,800 that is located in the capital of Bangladesh. - This research has been conducted on particular age, gender, education and class. Prior to start data collection, we pre-test the questionnaire in *Jahurul Haq Hall* and *Rokeya Hall* as the residential area of Dhaka University knowing that pre-testing questionnaire gives us valuable insight about the response of the data and questionnaire. Using random selection, the study has been conducted on the both residential and non-residential students of 10 respective halls and a political space of Dhaka University. Among them 67.5% of the respondents were selected from residential hall and the rest 32.5% of the respondents were selected from non-residential students with 65.5% male respondents and 34.5% females.

We carried out survey method using sample size 110 students from the population of 33,000 students of Dhaka University. A set of structured questionnaire, with open ended and close ended questions, was prepared beforehand that was divided into subsections such as demographic, social networking, political knowledge and activity. The questionnaire was arranged keeping the study objectives in mind.

4.2. Techniques of Data Analysis

All survey data were analyzed using SPSS Software for the analysis of factors that determine the relationship between social networking media user and political participation. Data presentation has been completed through using coding system and transforming into percentage that helps to analyze data quantitatively. We analyzed data carefully penetrating connection between the use of social media and rate of political participation. For comparison secondary data were collected from relevant departments, published books and journals.

4.3. Limitations

The major limitation of the research is very small sample size as the survey had been conducted with our own limited financial capability. Another drawback of the research is that gender issue doesn't maintain equal proportion between male and female. As female's accessibility of the social media was limited in comparison with the male due to their economic dependency with the family is greater than the male.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1. Background of the Information

From the study, it has been evident that the greatest number of respondents (55.5%) have no email account and the rest of them (44.5%) have minimum one email account although 99.1% of the respondents have at least one Facebook account that have been used for maintaining social communication. Nevertheless, the highest percentage (94.5%) of the respondents said that they never participated in political activities through mail with the 5.5% rarely sent political email to participate an event, although more than three fourth (77.3%) of the users of Facebook account used Facebook daily. The study also reveals that 50% respondents read post on the political issue in a political Facebook group whereas only 11.8% enjoy political discussion and 13.6% comment on the post of political issue. A quarter of them (24.5%) ignore political discussion in a Facebook group while they are interested in many of the non-political ideas, concepts and pictures. Other than Facebook account, among the users of twitter account (38.2%) only 35.5% respondents said that they posted political tweet as most of them had no interest in political issue.

Table 1. Time spent in social media

	DU students	Male	Female
Less than 5 hours	40.9	23.63	17.27
5-10 hours	20.0	13.64	6.36
10-15 hours	17.3	10.91	6.36
15-20 hours	12.7	10	2.73
20+ hours	9.1	7.27	1.82
Number of cases	110	72	38

Table 2. Activities of SNWs user on the Social Networking Websites

Activities in SNWs	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Sending email on political issue	6	5.5	104	94.5
Posting twit on political issue	38	34.5	72	65.5
Activism in blog websites	7	6.36	103	93.64
Chat with FB friend	85	77.27	25	22.73
Update status and comment	80	72.73	30	27.27
Search/read political news/status	70	63.64	40	36.36
Share link/status/video	65	59.1	45	40.91
Following political figure	64	58.18	46	41.82
Member of political FB group	79	71.8	31	28.2
Discussion in a political FB group	82	74.5	28	25.5
Number of cases	110			

This picture clearly shows that most of the students, whether they have Facebook or twitter account, are unaware and unconscious about their political and civil rights and so they have less political concern and willing to political participation using e-mail, Facebook or twitter. If we make comparison among the users of technological network, Facebook users are clearly ahead comparing with e-mail and twitter users. This situation is closely associated with the time period. A half of the respondents use social networking websites less than one hour a day and more than 40% use SNWs less than five hours a week (see table 1). Further 20, 17.3 and 21.8% students use social media within the range of 5-10, 10-15 and more than 15 hours a week respectively. According to gender perspective, male participation in Facebook using is higher than the female students as data shows that 23.6% male and 17.3% female students use social media less than five hours a week, similarly about a total of

42% male and 17% female use social media more than five hours a week(see table 1).

In this way, data permit us to measure the effects of time spent in online on political participation and political activity as it is argued that more time spent in social networking websites increased political consciousness as well as political activity of the respondents.

5.2. Linkage of Social Networking Websites with Political Issues

As stated earlier, the study emphasized the role social media in connection with the political participation, political discussion and political analysis. The analysis of table two reveals that the highest percentage (94.5%) of the respondents doesn't send email, 65.5% don't twit and about 94% of the bloggers don't use blog website about the

political issue and subjects or incidents as they are more interested in non-political issues. This result clearly conveys insignificant linkage between the use of email, twitter and blog and political participation or political concern. Although more than three fourth (77.3%) of the respondents continuously chat with their Facebook (FB) friends and 72.7% update status and comments on various issues but most of the Facebook users are indifferent to political issues and interest.

As high as 72% members are involved in Facebook group in which political matters have been discussed and among them 74.5% respondents said they were engaged in discussion in the Facebook group in which political issues are mentioned. Pew research center (2013) stated that, in 2012, 28% of SNW users said they posted links to political stories or articles, 20% followed a candidate or similar political figure and 43% of SNWs users decided to learn more about a political or social issue. On the other hand, the table-2 directly focuses that most of the Facebook users have interest in politics compared with other social networks users. In comparison with Pew research survey, data shows that 63.6% search political news or status and 59% share link or status on political comments as 58.2% have more or less support to some political figures. More than fifty percent (54.55%) users expresses that more social networking website use doesn't linked with political purpose but it is helpful to know prevailing situation and in supporting this 59% agree on the statement that it is possible to know contemporary event from SNWs(data are not mentioned in the table). In connection with this 40% do agree and 4.55% do strongly agree that Facebook increases political consciousness through getting political news and comments

while 38.18% neither agree nor disagree.

In fact, brain map suggests that, only specific types of online political activity such as chatting with friends, search political news/ link and read status, share link, status, video, followed political figure and reading their status, updating status and comment in the social networking websites have potentiality to enhance level of offline political participation.

5.3. Use of Social Media in Political Participation

Fourteen offline political activities such as attending a rally, giving opinion to radio, TV, newspaper, participating in human chain, motivating people on political issue, raising voice against unequal law, acquiring political knowledge, contacting with a politician, volunteering for political party/ figure, developing knowledge on politician, attending a demonstration, motivating people to political event, giving opinion on political scam, membership of a political party and attending political work in last 12 months are included for study hoping to get a linkage with the use of social media.

Fahmid Al Zaid (2016) stated that nowadays, social media is seen as a tool to mobilize people without any centralized leadership like political parties or trade unions citing example of 'Tanu issue' on rape and murder in Comilla area of Bangladesh and 'No vat' movement of private universities were highly influenced by social media. In connection with this, our survey data (see table-3) portrays that more than fifty percent of the respondents participated in rally (55.5%), in human chain (58.2%), and in any other political work in last year (57.3%).[36]

Table 3. Political knowledge and Activities of the social networking website users

Offline Political Activities	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Attend a rally	61	55.5	49	44.5
Giving opinion to radio, TV, Newspaper	22	20	88	80
Attend a human chain	64	58.2	46	41.8
Motivate people on political issue	36	32.7	74	67.3
Voice against unequal law	62	56.4	48	43.6
Acquire political knowledge	69	62.7	41	37.3
Contact with a politician	28	25.5	82	74.5
Volunteering for political party/ figure	35	31.8	75	68.2
Develop knowledge on politician	61	55.5	49	44.5
Attend a demonstration	37	33.6	73	66.4
Motivate people to political event	35	31.8	75	68.2
Giving opinion on political scam	40	36.4	70	63.6
Member of a political party	35	31.8	75	68.2
Attend in political work in last 12 month	63	57.27	47	42.73
Number of cases	110			

The data also shows more satisfactory and positive attitude on political activities in such way that as high as 62.7% respondents acquired political knowledge and 55.5% developed knowledge about politician from social media and for this reason 56.4% of the respondents raised voice against unequal laws implemented by the ruling party of the state. Further 32.2, 25.5, 31.8 and 33.6% respondent motivated people to participate in political event, making contact with politician, political party voluntarily and political demonstration correspondingly. As most of the students (68.2%) have no membership of any political party and as there is inflexible political regulation, most of them (63.6%) deprived themselves from giving any opinion on political comment and so only 20% gave opinion on politics to radio, TV or newspaper.

In fact, using social media is highly closed with political activities and related issues such as: political human chain, acquiring political knowledge, raising voice against unequal law, developing knowledge on politician and attending rally. By contrast, using social media is less linked with active participation in political work, motivating people, contacting with politician, voluntary participation and having membership in political party.

6. Conclusions

Use of social media is so widespread that it mainly enlarges communication network across the world in everywhere contributing to the not merely communication skill connecting with socio economic development but to enhance socio political awareness including political knowledge, political motivation and involvement in political activities. Thus social media has vast power to serve an insight to the viewer's political engagement. The hypothetical view was that the more they (users of SNWs) use the Internet, the more they engage in face-to-face interaction in all domains of their lives. But empirically close connection between the online activity and offline activity is partially authentic. Although there is little role of email in political discussion and engagement, a greater function of Facebook in relation to political discussion and political involvement cannot be ignored.

We can't say that more active in social media leads to less active in political participation, as viewer and participants are major part of social media. The use of Facebook obviously increases consciousness about political activity, knowledge on political situation, involvement in rally and human chain demanding socio political rights and attending in political work. On the other hand, online communication has little connection with motivating others in political actions, creating political membership and contacting political party. Consequently, it is focused that political environment has been created by social media which has greater impact on building opinion and active participation in political activities in some respect. In this regard, specific

types of online political activities augment offline political participation although interest in non-political issues may not be deserted.

We have some recommendation for those users of social networking websites:

- Users of social networking websites should keep far from spreading political scandal related post and sharing the post.
- Rumor or chitchat is also a great problem for the users of social media and so they should be careful about this phenomenon.
- Users should also be careful about false messages that can undermine the trust of people by diffusing, fabricating, and manipulating information.
- In time of election, media politics turns into scandal politics, assuming this, users should have special attention towards this distorted propaganda.

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