

Role of Social Media in an Individual's Civic Participation

Ashmeet Kaur, M.Phil Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, Delhi, India, ashmeetkaur1810@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the role of social media in fostering an individual's civic participation in the society. The use of social media and social networking platforms has been increasing. Social media has given people a wide range of options to share views about social issues. Civic participation is a personal or group effort to resolve a social issue. With the onset of social media, offline civic participatory activities have made a transition to the online space as well. The objective of this paper is to study the relationship between social media use and an individual's offline civic participation and online civic participation. The conceptual model has been derived to depict the relationship between the variables. This study concludes with recommendations and directions for future research.

Keywords —social media, social networking sites, civic participation, activism

I. INTRODUCTION

The communication media is an indispensable means to disseminate information and to keep us informed about global concerns. The technological advancements from print media to radios, televisions and then to social media, is a testimony that technology has improved the way we communicate with one another. Social media has emerged as a key tool in the Information and Communication Technology sector. It is defined as an array of digital tools such as text messaging, instant messaging, videos, blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, and My Space that are easy to use and are inexpensive [19]. The distinct feature of social media is its participatory paradigm. Social media differs from other media forms due to its user-generated content, which fosters communication in network structures through interactions and actions.

It has also been remarked that “*wireless communication has diffused way faster than any other form of communication technology in history*” [7]. Social media offers a host of opportunities like information search, building relationship, socializing, job opportunities, entertainment, shopping and many more. The increasing use of social media allows people to interact and share the content easily as well as cheaply. It allows people to share information or content about competitive brands or social causes. People have a desire to share important, valuable as well as entertaining content with others to build their relationships and to spread word-of-mouth out about certain brands and causes they like or support. However, the extensive use of social media comes with its set of adverse effects and consequences too. The list includes isolation from society, addition, intrusion into privacy and cyber crimes.

Objectives:

- To examine the relationship between social media use and an individual's civic participation
- To propose a conceptual model on the relationship between the variables.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media may act as a catalyst in facilitating social change and civic participation. As per the social constructivist view on society, social media platforms allow people to construct and shape reality and thus contribute towards a change in their society. There are social movements and social causes wherein social media is used to create an impact in a variety of ways. Social media can have both positive and negative impacts on the society. It can create positive impact by empowering citizens and promoting social welfare, but can also be used for political oppression. Social media serves as a new platform for civic participation. This study analyzes the relationship between social media use and users' civic participation.

Social media

The term social media is referred to as “*the media that provides the opportunity of socializing at the real-time basis*” that is expressed as the summation of the terms social and media [22]. The internet has made everyone a publisher by lowering the barriers to content creation and dissemination [17]. Internet and social media has given people a wide range of options to share views about social issues. Social media and social networking sites can be referred to as a dense network of one's friends for his/her social or professional interactions; and these have

immensely transformed the propagation of information by easing up the information's sharing and digestion [40]. There are many popular social networking sites around the globe. These include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn Google+ and many more. The dissemination of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn or Twitter has popularized internet services and social media around the globe. There are thousands of people who use Facebook and other sites everyday to share their passion for a number of causes ranging from illiteracy and women's issues to poverty or sanitation [19].

Contrary to mass communication tools, social networking sites allow users to send messages and receive feedback at the same time, thereby providing an effective communication between the parties [2]. Also, they do not run in a professional manner unlike mass media tools such as radio, television or newspaper. The participatory nature of social media allows the users to be producers of content at the same time [2]. Social media provides opportunities to people, help them to share ideas, seek information, build relationships, socialize and creates awareness among them [35]. However, the negative effects include addition, privacy intrusion, decreased productivity and cybercrimes [1], [24].

Civic participation

Civic participation relates to *"personal or group behavior intending to resolve community problems"* [44]. It is referred to as the involvement by people in social groups and their engagement in voluntary services for the community [33]. It refers to participation by people at the civic levels such as activities including fund collections, voluntary services, care for environment or community services, increasing awareness, participation in campaigns, help in eradication of poverty and hunger, fighting against social evils of child marriage, dowry system, promoting girl child education. The participation by people can be both civically and politically. It includes political engagement as well as involvement in everyday concerns of one's society [29]. While some studies examine participation through politics and elections such as voting or protesting [9], this study deals with participation at civic level such as voluntary work for the society [38].

Civic participation is a personal or group effort to resolve a social issue. These activities have made transition to the online space in different parameters of implementation and success. Civic participation occurs in the online world as well. Users spending longer duration online usually participate in many online civic activities that include liking content, posting comments, signing online petitions and motivating others [41]. The onset of social media has brought forward numerous online civic activities such as political expressions [8], [36]; volunteering for social

causes [25], [32]; and managing crises [10]. These fall under the ambit of online civic participation. Strong social networks and connections among people enable the resolution of social issues through better cooperation among people [30].

The relationship between social media and civic participation

With the communication landscape turning dense and participatory, the networked population can gain more access to information and opportunities to undertake collective action [34]. Social media use is related to forms of civic engagement [12], [23], [37], [41], [42]. Social media facilitates the formation of online networks that promote collective activities and achievement of shared goals [1], [12], [43]. It seems to foster traditional civic participation [36]. Social media acts as a collective action tool to help users enhance their civic engagement. Taking ITGlobal.org is a social networking platform dealing with civic engagement [32]. It serves as a platform to take actions against social causes of human rights, health or poverty [37]. Also, general social networking sites such as Facebook [27] or MySpace [6] play a role in creating awareness among people on critical issues and bringing them together for achieving shared goals. Governments can also use social media in areas of civic engagement, disaster management and transparency assurance [39].

The influence of communication media such as newspapers, television, internet and social media in fostering civic participation is examined by researchers. Television [16] and internet [5] foster engagement. Lately, because of the use of Facebook and Twitter by an increasing number of people [11] the impact of social media use on civic engagement has been an area of interest [4], [5], [14], [18], [20]. Social media users engage in civic activities through social networks and sharing of knowledge and content [18], [20]. Thus, social media use can foster civic participation. Individuals may exhibit more participation and support of causes that their friends share through social media. They may be a part of these activities in large numbers, both online and offline. This makes social media use to be positively related to an individual's online civic participation and offline civic participation.

However, it is found that there is no correlation between media use and civic participation [42]. Social media and social networking services allow people to be better informed and increase their participation in civic activities [3], however it is also argued that they may foster shallower relationships among people, may distract them from public affairs leading to civic disengagement [15]. The use of television was blamed for decreasing levels of civic participation among people, which in turn, lead to attention on mass media being the reason for rising issues on civic engagement [28]. The "time displacement hypothesis" by

Putnam asserted that heavy use of television distracts people from civic activities and their participation in the society. Considering the extensive penetration of internet and social media in the society, this rationale has been extended to the online communication media. It is argued that the more people spend their time being online the less they would spend their time catering to social or civic issues [21], [26].

“Activists are people and organizations that work to promote social or political changes, and the internet is one of many outlets for their work” [17]. Social media plays a significant role in promoting social activism by enhancing awareness about social issues. A person with views on social change would observe that he is not alone and can find one another via social media to perform activities or campaigns effecting a change. However, a question which arises is whether social activism and social awareness is translating into real social change. The proponents of civic engagement have advocated the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and the modern activists have started spending considerable amount of money and resources on social media use to promote their views online, get more committed activists and reach a larger audience [17]. However, it may distract resources which could have been effectively used through traditional means.

“Slacktivism describes the replacement of effective real-world activism with ineffective online activism” [17]. It is argued by the critics that online activism may lead to reduction in participation offline making it a form of entertainment rather than dedication. A Twitter success can be considered as a re-Tweet rather than taking real action. People engaging in social media activities through computers or cell phones to express their concerns on the prevalent social causes or issues by just liking or sharing the content have their support limited to social media instead of being actively engaged with these campaigns in reality [13]. Online activism and slacktivism are differentiated on the basis of presence of concrete, real-world actions which is necessary for successful online campaigns [17]. Social media acts a catalyst in activism and social change and successful online activism campaigns exist to augment successful offline campaigns [17].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses secondary data to accomplish the objectives. The research design is chosen to be exploratory. Various journals, articles and websites accessible through Ratan Tata Library, Department of Commerce, University of Delhi have been referred for the review. Their detailed references have been provided at the end of this paper. Research papers have been taken from various databases like JStor, Science Direct, Wiley, SAGE, Emerald, Springer, etc.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Social media use is related to offline civic participation and online civic participation. It serves as a tool of promoting collective actions and enhancing people’s participation. This also calls for a better comprehension on how social media can be used by people to explore different paths that foster civic actions. In all, the fear of adverse effects of social media on users’ civic engagement should be relieved. The interface of social media would encourage individuals to communicate easily who might otherwise feel shy from initiating conversations with others. Considering the concerns of declining participation [31] and the increasing relevance of civic participation, online measures of civic participation would better help us to understand the role of social media on civic participation. An individual’s involvement in civic participatory activities through social media platforms can be better measured by online participation index. It can be affirmed that social media acts a catalyst in activism and social change.

Based on the review of the research conducted in this subject, the present study identifies use of social media as having a crucial role to play in fostering an individual’s offline civic participation and online civic participation. The relationship seems to exist because of social media affordances easing civic participation. The following three variables are identified from the literature review:

- (i) Social media use
- (ii) Offline civic participation
- (iii) Online civic participation

The findings on the relationship between social media use and an individual’s civic participation can be summarized in the table as follows:

Relationship	Explanation
Social media use → Offline civic participation	The use of social media is positively related to an individual’s offline civic participation in terms of increase in awareness, addressing social causes, working towards collective action problems and volunteering for community services. However, on the negative side, social media use can lead to distraction from public affairs leading to disengagement among people.
Social media use → Online civic participation	The social media use is positively related to an individual’s participation in

	<p>online civic activities such as viewing and liking content on social issues, being part of online civic groups, signing online petitions or motivating their contacts for increasing involvement in civic activities. However online activism can take the form of ‘slacktivism’ replacing real-world action with superficial online activism.</p>
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Table 1: Relationship between social media use and individual’s civic participation

Source: Author’s Work

The relationship between social media use and individual’s civic participation, in the offline and online context, can be presented with the help of a conceptual model depicted below in figure 1:

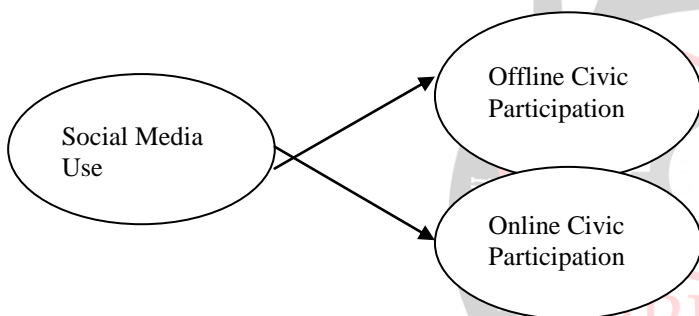


Figure 1: Conceptual model of civic participation

Source: Author’s work

V. CONCLUSION AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Information and communication technologies and social media are continuously evolving and diffusing into the society. The society has been witnessing an increasing use of social media and social networking sites by people. With this, the findings will contribute to a larger understanding of the role of social media use on an individual’s civic participation. Civic participation relates to an individual or collective effort to address social causes. Social media can stimulate online and offline civic participatory behavior among people. The use of social media facilitates civic participatory activities among people by providing them a platform using which they can increase their awareness, work collectively towards common goals, address social causes and fight against social evils.

However, the use of social media and social networking sites may lead to civic disengagement among people by inclining them more towards entertainment and distracting them from social issues. In the online arena as well, social media use can foster participation in online civic activities or membership in online civic groups. However, mere liking content on a social cause, commenting upon it or sharing it across social networking platforms may take form of ‘slacktivism’ which replaces real-world effective activism with ineffective online activism.

Considering the growing popularity and increasing use of social media in today’s world, the influence of social media use on an individual’s civic participation is of relevance. However, the limited research and lack of conclusive evidence about the relationship amongst the variables; social media use, offline civic participation and online civic participation call for further research in this field.

Also, the conceptualization and measurement of civic participation is a limitation to be addressed. The reliance on traditional scales of participation would not be an appropriate fit for the online media environment. Thus an index of online participation would better measure participation in the online media sphere. Considering the importance of these variables, the proposed model can be validated for empirical testing to propose conclusive results.

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