

DOES SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE INFLUENCE YOUTH'S INTEREST IN POLITICS?

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ABSTRACT

The power and the influence of Internet and the emergence of new media has significantly changed the world together with people's habits, behavior and communication. Over the years, social media have spread in most aspects of people's lives, especially among young generations. The role of social media has been investigated in many areas and it has also become very popular in the area of politics. Socially desirable goal is to encourage and increase the level of political participation, especially among young people. Previous research has shown that one of the influential factors for political participation is interest in politics. The purpose of this research was to determine the role of social media in shaping young people's interest in politics and political issues. The survey was conducted using online questionnaire among young people between the ages of 15 to 29. Results have shown that using Facebook for political discussions has a significant positive influence on young people's interest in politics. Using Twitter, however, has shown not to have significant influence on political interest of young people.

KEY WORDS: political interest, internet, social media, youth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political participation has historically been considered as a crucial element of democratic development. Some studies (e.g. Bakker and Vreese, 2011) show that youth participation in political activities in western countries is in decline. There is a serious academic concern about the low political participation among youth in many parts of developing and developed nations. What is specific about youth is that they are not stimulated by traditional media such as television, radio or newspaper. Their tendencies are directed toward new media – Internet and social networks. Social networks can easily be explained as “a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow creating and exchanging user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Many researchers investigated the relationship between social networks and political participation (Boulianne, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011; Ahmad and Sheikh, 2013; Sandoval-Almazan, 2017; Li and Chan, 2017) proving their existing connection. However, the aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between social networks and political interest. Political interest has shown to have a positive effect on political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Levy et al., 2016) and the purpose of this research is to determine to what extent are young people interested in politics and does the usage of Facebook and Twitter for political discussion influence their political interest.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relationship between social networks and politics was first researched in Bimber's 'contributions on the Internet impact in communication and interaction of citizens and politics' (Sandoval-Almazan (2017) according to Bimber and Copeland, 2013; Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagan, 2009; Bimber, 1998; Bimber, 1999). The importance and the influence of social networks in the context of politics was also proven by Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013). They have concluded that in the last few years social media have become an important political communication channel that enables political institutions and voters to directly interact with each other. Therefore, political activities might gain more transparency and citizens might be more involved into political decision-making processes.

Internet use can also be seen in the context of political knowledge. Dalrymple and Scheufele (2007) following the work of Neuman (1981) explain how 'political knowledge presents a two-dimensional construct. First, differentiation is a person's ability to identify factual information such as names, issues, and events. Second, conceptual integration is a person's ability to take these smaller bits of information and string them together to create larger ideas and abstract terms.' A relationship between the use of online news sources and levels of integrated knowledge was tested in their research. They came to the conclusion

that online news media have positive effects on integrated knowledge gain, such as candidate likes and dislikes and candidate issue stance knowledge. Except above mentioned researches, the Internet and social networks in the context of political knowledge and participation were involved in the work of Dimitrova et al. (2014). Their research led to the results demonstrating that the use of digital media has only limited effects on political knowledge and political participation. Furthermore, they point out that in the level of political knowledge greater role plays political interest, prior political knowledge, and attention to politics in traditional media formats. These results are consistent with previous research about the influence of new media on political knowledge conducted by Groshek & Dimitrova (2011) and Kaufhold et al. (2010). Dimitrova et al. (2014) also highlight that '...the use of political party web sites and, in particular, social media showed both significant and positive effects on political participation.' If we take social networks into focus then it is especially important to mention that they come to the following findings: '...using social media for political purposes was one of the strongest predictors of participation while use of online news sites, as expected, did not increase participation.' The following is an example of a research in which the benefit of social networks (in this case Facebook and Twitter) has not been confirmed. Sandoval-Almazan (2017) has conducted research by following hashtags (#iamproletariat and #iam123) from political parties at the time of a political campaign on Facebook and Twitter. In his research he came to the conclusion that the activity on social networks (usage of social media tools in campaigns) of candidates in the elections has no relation whatsoever to the victory in the elections. In that particular case in Mexico, Peña Nieto won against the opinion of Twitter users and Facebook lack of activity (Sandoval-Almazan 2017). However, number of previous studies have shown opposite results (Boulianne, 2009; Dalrymple & Scheufele, 2007; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Kiouis & Dimitrova, 2006). Effing (2011) also confirms the usefulness of using social networks in political campaigns stating that 'more activity on social networks means greater election participation.' When considering the use of Internet and social networks by politicians, Ward et al. (2003) recommend using the Internet due to cost reduction, better mobilization of supporters, encouraging electoral participation and equity participation.

Despite of some different results in the above mentioned researches, Shirky (2011) highlights the importance of social networks by stating that: '...social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements, just as most of the world's authoritarian governments (and alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it.' Viewed from any context 'social media data in the form of user-generated content on blogs, microblogs, SNS, discussion forums, and multimedia sharing websites (e.g., YouTube) present many new opportunities and challenges to both producers and consumers of information' (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013).

2.1. Facebook and Twitter in the context of politics

Nowadays, when there are many forms of social networks, two of them stand out - Facebook and Twitter. The use of these two platforms, in political sense, has exploded since 2008 Obama's presidential campaign (Sandoval-Almazan, 2017). Furthermore, social networks like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly used as a source of news (Pew, 2015), so the fact that 44 percent of Americans used social networks get information about presidential campaign in 2016 should not be surprising (Pew, 2016). The fact that television is still the most popular and the most commonly used media and that the growth of social network users is skyrocketing every day has led to the increased usage of dual-screening. Dual-screening can be explained as 'the bundle of practices that involve integrating, and switching across and between, live broadcast media and social media' (Vaccari et al., 2015) Chadwick et al. (2017) explain the possible impact of dual-screening in future: 'Dual-screening is potentially reshaping political agency and the effects might scale up to alter the structure of communication relating to a televised political debate and the broader election campaign.' Therefore, it is necessary to mention dual screening when it comes to social media and politics, precisely because the activity on social networks can be inspired by what is being watched, listened or read.

Facebook is far the most popular and most used social network. In 2015 there was one billion active daily users, and today Facebook can be proud of averagely 1.32 billion active users every day (data taken for June 2017) (Facebook official site, 2017). 1.23 billion people represents one sixth of the total world population and when only one type of social media (in this case Facebook) has so many active daily users, it is easy to conclude that the impact of social networks on people and their everyday lives really exists. Bode (2012) focused on political behaviour and found out that 'intensely engaging with one's Facebook community facilitates behaviours and activities that spur political participation of all kinds.' Furthermore, Conroy et al. (2012) showed that Facebook positively affects political engagement and they explain it with following: 'Facebook allows for the creation of online political groups that provide many of the benefits that we have known face-to-face groups to provide for decades, such as information, motivation for political action, and a forum for discussion and communicative exchanges.' Examining the link between political participation and Facebook, Tang and Lee (2013) found out that exposure to political information on Facebook has a positive effect on political participation.

Twitter is social microblogging network established in 2006. Short messages called "tweets" which are limited to 140 characters is what makes Twitter special (Sandoval-Alamaz, 2017). Data from March 2015 show that Twitter had more than 1.3 billion registered users. Moreover, data form July 2017 show that Twitter surprisingly had approximately 157 million daily active users (Smith, 2017). Twitter (especially in America) is widely used social network during political events and research on Twitter is more

recent than Facebook (Sandoval-Almaz, 2017). Lassen and Brown (2011) analyzed the use of Twitter among Congress members in the United States. Authors concluded that, in the House, Republicans are far more likely to use Twitter than Democrats are. Gainous and Wagner (2013) explored in the same direction. Kruikemeier (2014) has researched how political candidates use Twitter, and major conclusion is that Twitter has significant impact on preferential votes. But not everyone agrees, Sandoval-Almazan (2017) in accordance with that gives example: 'A controversial research was made by Tumasjan et al., (2011) when they revealed the positive impact of Twitter on elections, but was later on contradicted by another research (Gayo-Avello et al., 2011) studying congress election on the US in 2010.' Twitter is especially used in, already mentioned, dual screening when TV audiences use Twitter and tweeting for following, searching information or expressing their opinions about political events, candidates, debates or situations (and similar) during live shows (Sasseen et al., 2013; Verizon, 2012; Wohn and Na, 2011). Chadwick et al. (2017) explored Twitter usage during dual screening and concluded that frequency of access to Twitter is positively and significantly associated with the motivation to acquire information and share information and opinions, while frequency of access to other social media is positively and significantly associated with the desire to influence others.

In many studies related to political behavior, users of Facebook and Twitter are researched together. Hyun and Kim (2015) found out that political conversation via social media contributes to boosting political participation. Further, regarding political participation, Skoric and Zhu (2016) found that expressive uses of egocentric social media, including writing and commenting on blogs, Facebook, or Twitter, were not predictive of offline political participation during the elections. Abdulrauf et al. (2017) researched the behavior of young people in the context of social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and politics. Their research, conducted in Malaysia was primarily related to their youth. Authors came to the following conclusions: 'political knowledge moderated the relationship between access to political information on Facebook and Twitter and online political participation on Facebook and Twitter' and 'political knowledge moderated the relationship between political interest and online political participation on Facebook and Twitter.' Charles (2010) and Pattie et al. (2004) came to the same conclusion, but they also discovered how political knowledge did not moderate the relationship between policy satisfaction and online political participation on Facebook and Twitter. According to these researches, Vitak et al. (2011) claim that Facebook and YouTube are widely used for political knowledge and political engagement by youth.

2.2. Political interest among youth

Russo and Stattin (2017) note that 'political interest is a key for the survival and development of democracies.' Political interest can simply be explained as how much politics is attractive to someone (Dostie-Goulet, 2009). Same author further explains that 'a politically interested citizen will

give particular attention to one or many subjects linked to public space or collective concern, such as the environment, public policy, human rights, or an election, to name only a few.' Political interest among youth is important because it is one of the most consistent predictors of political participation (Levy et al. (2016). Ilišin V. (2003) explains that youth in contemporary society at the same time represent a great political potential and latent problematic part of the population whose political behavior is less predictable than other social groups. She also points out that youth in Europe and Croatia show below average participation in political institutions and processes. Furthermore, compared to the older people, they more often declare that they will not vote. In a research from 2013, Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš (2013), reveal that 10% of young people in Croatia have a great interest in politics and 54% say they have absolutely no interest in it. This indicates that political interest among youth needs to be increased because such low participation is a threat to the future of representative democracy. Kovačić and Vrbat (2014) agree with above mentioned and add that except youth's lack of interest in politics, ignorance of the same can be fatal to the democratic system too. Political interest does not differ only between young and old, it differs between men and women too. Bennet and Bennet (1989) came to the conclusion that men are being interested in politics, current affairs and government more than woman. This difference depends on several causes (including situational, structural, and sex-role socialization). Slightly opposite to it, Russo and Stattin (2017) found no gender differences in the effects of political interest on changes in autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Dostie-Goulet (2009) in his study concludes that friends and parents about equally affect the development of political interest among youth while teachers have a lesser influence. Besides that, political interest increases when they move out from their parents' home. He also confirms positive impact of social networks on political interest, and as an example mentions Obama's president campaign from Lupia's and Philpot's (2005) paper. The research of Niemi and Hepburn (1995) on the other hand, states that political interest is increasing in high school. Furthermore, 'The wide availability of communication technologies nowadays such as social media has provided young people with more channels than ever to find out about, discuss and engage in politics' (Li and Chan, 2017). Lately, many researches have questioned the impact of the Internet on political participation among the younger population, a task motivated by the decrease in political interest and electoral participation among young people across mature democracies (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011). When social networks and political interest are viewed together, papers of Boulianne (2011) and Kim et al. (2013) should be mentioned. They come to a conclusion that social networks allow political disinterested users to 'uniquely experience politics through politically mobilizing action and messages by their peers and incidental expo-sure, which could help promote political interest' (Yamamoto et al., 2017). Kovačić and Vrbat (2014) warn that countries with a high degree of youth disinterest for politics, risk having politically illiterate youth and potentially incompetent managers in the future.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants and procedure

The research is based on an online survey carried out in 2017 on a convenient sample of 220 young people between the ages of 15 and 29. The information obtained was analysed using the statistical software package SPSS version 21.0. Statistical techniques of univariate analysis (frequency distribution, central tendency measures) and multivariate analysis (reliability analysis, linear regression) were used. Table 1. shows sample description.

Table 1. Sample description

		N	%
Gender	Male	60	27.3
	Female	160	72.7
Education	No school	1	0.5
	Primary school	5	2.3
	High school	115	52.3
	Faculty	85	38.6
	Master's degree	12	5.5
	Doctorate	2	0.9
Place of residence	Village	22	10.1
	Town/city	195	89.9
Employment status	Student	176	80
	Unemployment	11	5
	Employment	33	15
Members of household	1	5	2.3
	2	16	7.3
	3	48	21.9
	4	77	35.2
	5	49	22.4
	>5	24	11
Monthly income of all members in household	<400€	12	5.5
	401-800€	44	20
	801-1200€	68	30.9
	1201-1600€	40	18.2
	>1600€	56	25.5
Religion	Catholic	174	79.1
	Atheist	16	7.3
	Agnostic	16	7.3
	Orthodox	3	1.4
	Muslim	4	1.8
	Other	7	3.2

Source: Authors

98.6% of the respondents said that they use social networks, and only 1.4% of them said that they do not use social networks. Most of the respondents use Facebook (98.6%) and Instagram (70.45%), then Google+ (21.81%), LinkedIn (16.36%) and least number of them uses Twitter (10.2%). Even though Twitter was least represented social network among respondents, the aim of the research was to examine the influence of two most popular and most suitable networks for political discussion. It is very unlikely for Instagram and LinkedIn to be considered suitable platforms for political discussion considering the fact that they have specific purposes (Instagram is a photo sharing application and LinkedIn is a business and employment oriented social networking service).

3.2. Variables and measurement

Measurement scales were created by authors or adapted from previous studies in this field. Facebook and Twitter usage for political discussion was adapted from Abdulrauf and Ishak (2017). These constructs measured to what extend ranging from never to very often (Likert-type scale from 1 to 5) participants use Facebook and Twitter for political discussion (post, share, tweet or comment posts about politics and like or follow politicians or political parties). Political interest was comprised of three statements adapted from the research of Banerjee and Chaudhuri (2016). All proposed constructs have adequate reliability (Table 2). According to Nunnally (1978) it is considered for Cronbach's alpha to be acceptable above the value of 0.7.

Table 2. Reliability analysis of the constructs

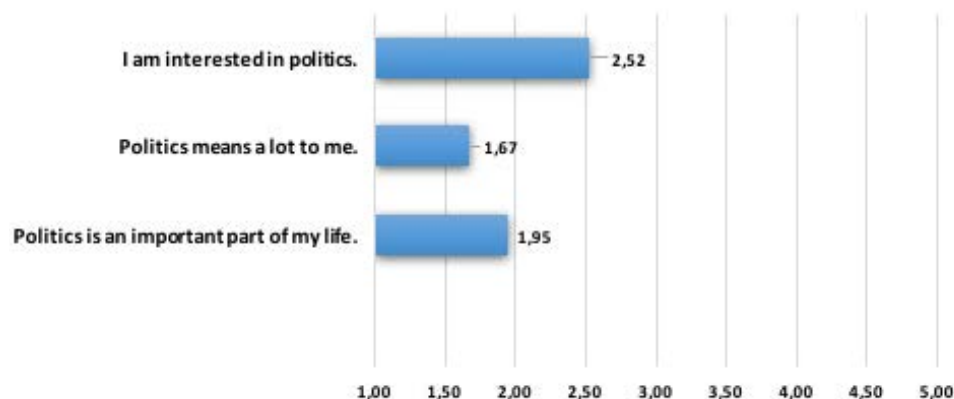
Measurement scale	Number of items	Mean	Variance	Standard deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Facebook usage for political discussion	7	1.827	0.529	0.727	0.811
Twitter usage for political discussion	8	1.679	0.777	0.882	0.910
Political interest	3	2.045	1.226	1.10713	0.889

Source: Authors

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The research results have confirmed the low level of political interest among youth. Chart 1. depicts the average scores of how interested young people are in politics on the scale from 1 to 5.

Chart 1. Young people's political interest



Source: Authors

Extremely low average scores confirm that young people do not take interest in politics. The lack of interest leads to political apathy and decreases the level of political participation. Therefore, it is necessary to explore influential factors on political interest in order to influence its increase.

The aim of this research was to determine does the usage of social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) for

political discussion influence youth's interest in politics. To test this research question, linear regression was conducted. Political interest was the dependent variable, while the usage of Facebook and Twitter for political discussion were independent variables. Table 3. shows model summary. The proportion of explained variance as measured by R-Squared for the regression is 71,4%.

Table 3. Model summary

Model	R	r2	Adjusted r2	Std. Error of the estimate	Change Statistics				
					R square change	F change	Df1	Df2	Sig. F Change
1	0.845	0.714	0.680	0.71923	0.714	21.201	2	17	0.000

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Facebook, Twitter
- b. Dependent Variable: Political interest

Source: Authors

ANOVA analysis showed that the model is statistically significant (p=0.000).

Table 4. Regression coefficients of the model

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Significance
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-0.377	0.454		-0.830	0.418
	Facebook	1.042	0.251	0.642	4.154	0.001
	Twitter	0.428	0.218	0.303	1.959	0.067

Source: Authors

Table 4. depicts the results of linear regression analysis. As it can be seen, Facebook usage for political discussion shows to have a significant positive influence on political interest among youth (t=4.154; p=0.001; β=0.642). Using Twitter

for political discussion, however, has shown not to have the influence on political interest among youth (t=1.959; p=0.067; β=0.303).

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to establish whether using social networks for political discussion increases the level of political interest. The results have shown that using Facebook for political discussion has a significant positive influence on political interest. The more active young people are on Facebook in political discussion, the greater is their political interest. Twitter in this case did not have any significant influence on political interest but Twitter is not that widely used in Croatia as it is in some other countries so its effects cannot be generalized. The results of this research could be helpful for politicians and political parties in forming their political and marketing strategies. Facebook can be a very useful tool to reach young people and get them to be more involved in politics. It is necessary to encourage young people to be more active on social networks in political context and to develop their political interest because they are the ones who will shape the future of politics and thus the future of the entire country.

The research has some limitations. First limitation is related to the sample. The sample is convenient and was limited to a smaller geographic area. Another limitation related to the sample is the fact that 72.2% of the respondents are women. Regarding the usage of social networks, it is already mentioned that the results related to Twitter could not be generalized due to its low usage in Croatia. Further research in this area should focus on exploring other influential factors on political interest as well as the influential factors on online and offline political participation. Also, it would be interesting to explore if there are any differences regarding political interest among men and women or differences between some other sociodemographic factors (income, education, place of residence, etc.) Exploring and understanding the influence of certain factors on youth's political interest can help developing strategies aimed to increase their level of their political interest and thereby also to increase their level of political participation which is a socially desirable goal.

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