

Social Network Politics: Communication and Voter Turnout from User Gratification Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into assessing user satisfaction regarding political actors' communication on social network sites (SNS) through the lenses of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Two-Step Flow Model. We further scrutinize the extent to which users engage in political communication and their preferred modes of participation on SNS. Additionally, we compare user engagement on SNS with voter turnout. A questionnaire was administered to a random sample comprising 135 respondents to acquire this data. Our findings reveal the absence of statistically significant differences in user satisfaction levels with political actors' communication on SNS. Moreover, our analysis indicates a preference among SNS users for following the posts of political actors over engaging with other users or initiating direct communication with political actors. At last, we found that user engagement in political communication on SNS is lower than actual voter turnout among the participants of this study.

Key words: *uses and gratification theory, two-step flow model, political communication, social networks sites, voter turnout*

Introduction

The widespread use of the Internet has marked a turning point in human communication. The Internet availability in households worldwide has exponentially increased in line with technological development and falling prices. Over two decades have passed since the introduction of Internet cafes and desktop computers to laptops and smartphones with fast Internet. There are over 5 billion active Internet users today worldwide, accounting for 66% of the global population¹. Internet access in Croatia is available to 84% of Croatian citizens, representing a minimal decrease of 4% compared to 2022. According to available data, Croatia is below the European Union average, where Internet access is available to 92% of the population².

The Internet significantly influences interpersonal communication as a form of human communication characterized by exchanging messages between two or more people through verbal or non-verbal signals, spontaneously or planned, by the symbolic system and the environment in which communication takes place³. Although Internet communication does not replace face-to-face communication, it is still a specific environment where communication with other users is fast, cheap, and widely available.

This communication typically occurs through social networks, which we can define as web-based platforms that users do not necessarily use to meet new people and network but to communicate with individuals who are part of their extended social network in real life⁴. Although excessive dependence on social network sites (onward SNSs) can negatively affect real-life interpersonal relationships, individuals who do not understand or, for some reason, do not use SNS often become marginalized⁵. At this point, Facebook, the most popular social media and SNS is actively used by 64% of the global population. The Croatian average use of Facebook is 81%, equal to the European average⁶.

In Croatia, all political parties that consistently surpass the electoral threshold in relevant polls use SNS. The same applies to political actors, predominantly party leaders (mayors), independent candidates, the Prime Minister, and the President. Lesinger⁷ emphasizes that in Croatia, Facebook is the most effective social media and SNS through which political parties and actors achieve the most visible results. Often, smaller parties strive to reach users with more posts⁸, which can be attributed to their modest financial resources allocated for political campaigning.

Social media and SNS worldwide have long become adequate communication channels for politicians and other political actors to achieve specific goals⁹. It is important to note that political actors communicate different topics to different audiences, meaning that platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are typically utilized differently. X is a platform commonly used for mass communication about public policies, whereas the goal of political communication on Facebook is to establish personal contact and mobilize potential voters¹⁰.

Personality is an increasingly important concept for political actors on the Internet. Van Santen and Van Zoonen¹¹ observe that increasing political actors' use of new Internet platforms can be characterized as personalization, shifting attention from the party to political actors. Kruikemeier et al.¹² note that personalized and highly interactive political communication on the Internet positively influences politics and brings it closer to citizens. In this regard, we can highlight The Social Presence Theory¹³ from the book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*, which describes the degree of presence one person feels towards another when using a specific communication medium. Tanis¹⁴ points out that the sense of presence increases when communication via a particular medium resembles interpersonal interaction. Although face-to-face communication is challenging to replace, given the ability to directly address many users simultaneously, empowering the sense of (political) presence emerges as one of the main reasons political actors and parties opt for direct communication with users via SNS. This matter is particularly significant given that data suggests young individuals perceive online communication as slightly less qualitative than face-to-face interaction¹⁵.

Alongside the indispensable political communication through traditional mass media, political communication on SNS has become one of the primary methods through which political parties and actors seek to transform users into voters and motivate them to turn out at the polls. Supporting the efforts of political actors online is the increased distrust in official institutions, accompanied by lower voter turnout and reduced reach of traditional mass media. Consequently, social network use is more widespread for political information purposes¹⁶. Cho¹⁷ also notes this trend towards seeking alternative sources of information, emphasizing that consumers of traditional mass media pay more attention to the projected image of candidates. In contrast, they prefer interpersonal communication and the Internet regarding real issues.

One of the significant challenges in political communication on SNS arises from the emergence of filter bubbles¹⁸, which expose users to similar political content due to algorithm settings while hindering or restricting access to different opinions and political viewpoints. This problem is equally pertinent for political parties and actors and users engaging in political discourse with other users. Although the filter bubble threatens pluralism of opinion and, thus, democracy, its impact on voter turnout

may not necessarily be negative. The reason for this is the need to confirm one's opinion or reflection on an issue through interaction with others, sometimes stronger than finding a common compromise in constructive debate. On the other hand, political disagreements can shake individuals' personal beliefs and negatively impact voter turnout¹⁹.

This paper will analyze the level of user satisfaction with the communication of political actors on social media platforms. From a theoretical perspective, we will investigate user preferences and personal engagement in the context of political communication on social media. Finally, we will analyze any potential correlation with voter turnout in the real world.

Theoretical Background

Unlike the early 20th-century theories of mass communication, which focused on media effects by considering the audience as passive recipients of propaganda messages²⁰, the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is centered on the habits of media audiences. This theory was introduced 50 years ago in the book *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratification Research* by Elihu Katz and Jay Bumlér. According to UGT, media must compete with other sources for the audience's attention, as audiences are simultaneously diverse and active, and they consciously choose media that will satisfy their personal needs²¹.

The satisfaction of media audiences' needs through social media and SNSs' lens can be viewed as user satisfaction. It is the users of social networks who satisfy their media needs by searching for content from various sources. Within this paper, the content we examine will be limited to political topics that users can access in multiple ways. One is political communication, whether following political actors' posts, expressing political views, engaging in political discussions with other users, or directly addressing political actors on SNS.

That communication in a particular social environment plays a significant role in shaping political attitudes was first noticed by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. In their book from 1948, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, they formulated the two-step flow model of communication, which remains relevant today. According to this model, messages from mass media first reach prominent individuals, or so-called opinion leaders, who then share this information with less active individuals. Accordingly, it can be said that interpersonal communication has a more substantial influence on shaping public opinion than mass media²².

Previous Research

Previous research on political communication on SNS has shown various trends regarding user engagement

and its impact on voter turnout. Vergeer et al.²³ analyzed the Twitter profiles of political actors in the Netherlands before the 2009 European Parliament elections. The results indicated a tendency among users to follow only one candidate, leading to the formation of homogeneous communities and consequently making it difficult to motivate new voters. The authors also observed that reciprocity in mutual following between political actors and users diminishes as the number of followers increases, making SNS less social. Political actors then use their profiles solely for information dissemination rather than engaging in two-way communication with followers.

Political actors have long recognized the potential of SNS in political communication. This was demonstrated in a study conducted in Norway by Gunn Sara Enli and Eli Skogerbø²⁴. Through interviews with political actors in two electoral cycles, they concluded that the primary motives for political communication on Facebook and Twitter are the opportunity to market their policies and communicate with users. In direct communication with users, the authors implied a tendency of political actors to target users with a large number of followers, which is consistent with the two-step communication model.

Bode and Dalrymple²⁵ noted that the number of followers on the Twitter profiles of political actors is only relevant if those followers are also active. They emphasized that many followers mean very little if they do not encourage the two-step flow of communication through tweets and retweets. The authors concluded that the only way to motivate undecided users to turn out to vote is through the dissemination of information by political actors beyond their homogeneous communities on social media.

In addition to political actors, social media users themselves are the subject of research. Zúñiga et al.²⁶ analyzed the behavior of respondents who use social media to inform themselves about social and political issues. The study found a positive correlation between such active users and their civic and electoral participation online and offline. The authors concluded that information exchange through communication on social media can strengthen social ties, generate social capital, and create conditions for further amplification of civic and political participation.

In addition to the filter bubble primarily conditioned by the algorithm of a particular SSN, when it comes to political communication, it is necessary to mention the phenomenon of echo chambers. In this case, it is a phenomenon created by users themselves. In a study by Barberá et al.²⁷, nearly 150 million tweets across 12 political and non-political categories were machine-analyzed. In the case of political categories, the authors noticed that information is primarily transmitted in communication among users with similar ideological positions. In other words, a specific ideological segregation was identified on social media platforms.

The Research Objective

The research aims to analyze the level of user satisfaction with the communication of political actors on SNS from the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Two-Step Flow Model. The primary goal is to investigate the level of user satisfaction with political actors' communication on SNS. The secondary goal involves exploring the level of user engagement and preferences in political communication. It is important to note that the focus of this research is not on the "why" users on SNS, as an active audience, consume certain media content and participate in political communication. Instead, the authors are interested in the "extent" to which users participate and which forms of engagement they prefer in political communication on SNS. Finally, in a comparative analysis, the research will examine any potential connection between the level of satisfaction and user engagement in the context of political communication on SNS about voter turnout in the real world.

During the preparation of the research, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. To what extent are users satisfied with political actors' communication on SNS?

RQ2. To what extent do users participate, and which forms of engagement do they prefer on SNS regarding political communication?

RQ3. Is there a connection between user engagement in political communication on SNS and voter turnout in the real world?

The following hypotheses were tested in the study:

H1. There are statistically significant differences in the level of user satisfaction with political actors' communication on SNS based on the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

H2. Regarding engagement within political communication on SNS, users prefer communicating with others.

H3. The level of user engagement in the context of political communication on SNS is consistent with voter turnout in the real world.

Methodology

The study utilized a quantitative research method, conducted through an anonymous questionnaire on a random sample of 135 respondents. The first part of the questionnaire was used to collect the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, and level of education). This was followed by questions exploring respondents' preferences and personal engagement in the context of political communication on social media. The research was conducted through four (4) categories: following posts from political actors, expressing their own political views, engaging in political discussions with other users, and

direct communication with political actors. Respondents were given five (5) responses (yes; sometimes; rarely; never; I do not use social media) to the statement within each category.

In the central part of the questionnaire, we measured the level of user satisfaction with the communication of political actors on SNS. The level of satisfaction was analyzed through three (3) questions: "I am satisfied with the way political actors contribute to the general awareness of users through posts on social network sites," "I am satisfied with the way political actors communicate with users on social network sites," and "I am satisfied with the overall way political actors communicate on social network sites." Measurement was conducted using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – neither agree nor disagree (neutral); 4 – agree; 5 – strongly agree).

The last part of the questionnaire consisted of four (4) questions, the first three (3) of which related to voter turnout in local, parliamentary, and presidential elections (options provided: always; sometimes; rarely; never), while the last question related to personal political engagement (options provided: yes; no; no, but I am considering it; no, and I am not considering it).

Results

Social demography

All 135 respondents answered all questions in the survey questionnaire. In the sample, males accounted for 36.3% (N=49), while females accounted for 63.7% (N=86) of the total respondents. The most represented age group of respondents is between 31 and 40 years old (37.8%), followed by 41 to 50 years old (25.2%), 21 to 30 years old (21.5%), and the least represented age group is respondents older than 50 years old (15.6%). Regarding the level of education, respondents with higher education accounted for 64.4% of the total number of respondents. The percentage of respondents with secondary vocational education is 34.8%, while 0.7% have lower vocational education.

Level of user satisfaction with political actors' communication on SNS

a research construct of the same name has been formed to analyze user satisfaction with political actors' communication on social media platforms. The construct consists of three (3) categories measured using a Likert scale (Figures 1–3).

Statistical tests of the research construct were conducted using the IBM SPSS statistical software. The reliability of the construct was tested using Cronbach's Alpha test (0–1), and a good coefficient was determined ($\alpha=0.794$). Through descriptive analysis of the variable (construct), the level of user satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 5 was determined (Mean=3.121). From this, it is concluded that users rated their satisfaction with the communication of

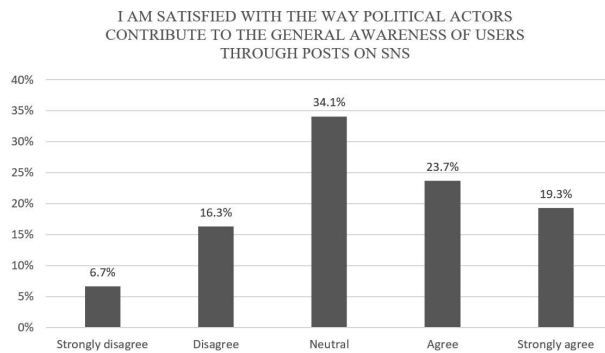


Fig. 1. Likert Scale – Respondents' Attitudes Towards the Way Political Actors Contribute to Users' General Awareness Through Posts on SNS.

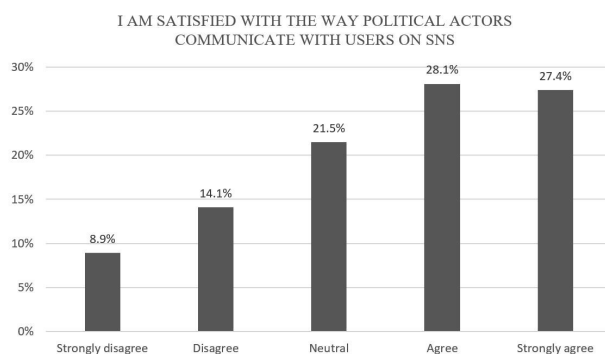


Fig. 2. Likert Scale – Respondents' Attitudes Towards the Way Political Actors Communicate with Users on SNS,.

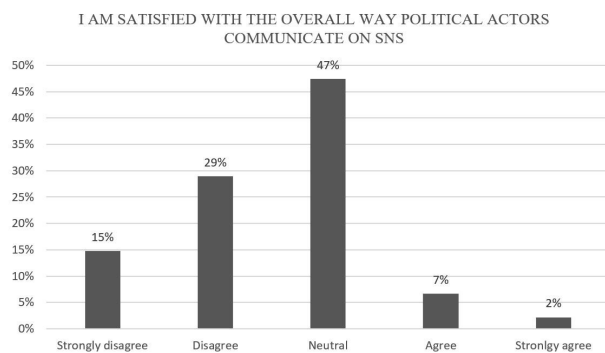


Fig. 3. Likert Scale – Respondents' Attitudes Towards the Overall Way Political Actors Communicate on SNS.

political actors on social media platforms as "good." Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no statistically significant differences ($p>0.05$) regarding the age and education level of the respondents. Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance, and accordingly, the p-value of the independent samples t-test was interpreted, showing no statistically significant differences based on gender ($p>0.05$). Considering the obtained results of the analysis of the research construct, the first hypothesis (H1. There are statistically significant differences in the level of user sat-

isfaction with political actors' communication on SNS based on the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents) is rejected.

Level of engagement and user preferences in the context of political communication on social media

Below are the research results on the level of engagement and preferences of users regarding political communication on social media (Table 1). A total of 51.1% of users (yes=11.9%, sometimes=39.2%) follow the posts of political actors on SNS. 32.6% rarely follow these posts, while 11.9% never do. The remaining 4.4% do not use SNS.^a

TABLE 1
I FOLLOW POSTS BY POLITICAL ACTORS ON SNS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	16	11.9	11.9	11.9
Someties	53	39.2	39.2	51.1
Rarely	44	32.6	32.6	83.7
Never	16	11.9	11.9	95.6
I don't use SNS	6	4.4	4.4	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

Regarding expressing their political views on SNS (Table 2), only 15.6% of users do so (yes=3%, sometimes=12.6%). 20.7% of users rarely express political views, and the majority (57%) never do. The remaining 6.7% do not use SNS.

TABLE 2
I EXPRESS MY OWN POLITICAL ATTITUDES ON SNS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	4	3.0	3.0	3.0
Someties	17	12.6	12.6	15.6
Rarely	28	20.7	20.7	36.3
Never	77	57.0	57.0	93.3
I don't use SNS	9	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

In total, 20% of users (yes=3.7%, sometimes=16.3%) communicate about politics on SNS with other users. 28.1% of them rarely communicate with other users about politics, and most users (45.2%) never do. The remaining 6.7% do not use SNS (Table 3).

^a The percentage of respondents who stated that they do not use SNS is 2.3% lower for this question than the following three. One possible explanation is that some respondents interpreted the following posts of political actors on social media through other mass media channels that convey them..

TABLE 3
I ENGAGE IN POLITICAL DISCUSSION WITH OTHER SNS USERS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	5	3.7	3.7	3.7
Someties	22	16.3	16.3	20.0
Rarely	38	28.1	28.1	48.1
Never	61	45.2	45.2	93.3
I don't use SNS	9	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the last category, direct communication between users and political actors on SNS (Table 4), only 11.1% of users (yes = 3.7%, sometimes = 7.4%) engage in this activity. Users rarely directly address political actors, with 17.8% of users doing so, while 64.4% never do. The remaining 6.7% do not use SNS.

TABLE 4
I ENGAGE IN POLITICAL DISCUSSION WITH POLITICAL ACTORS ON SNS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	5	3.7	3.7	3.7
Someties	10	7.4	7.4	11.1
Rarely	24	17.8	17.8	28.9
Never	87	64.4	64.4	93.3
I don't use SNS	9	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

The presented results show that users' preferences regarding forms of engagement in political communication primarily (51.1%) involve following posts from political actors. Political communication with other users ranked second (20%), thus rejecting the second hypothesis (H2. Regarding engagement within political communication on SNS, users prefer communicating with others.).

Users stance regarding voter turnout

in this study, respondents directly answered questions about voter turnout in various elections. Regarding local elections, 68% of respondents confirmed that they always vote in local elections, 26.7% confirmed that they sometimes vote in local elections, and 5.2% never vote in local elections (Table 5).

70.4% of respondents confirmed that they always vote in parliamentary elections. 22.2% vote sometimes, and 7.4% never vote.

The highest turnout is recorded for presidential elections, with 73.3% of respondents always voting, 21.5% vote sometimes, and 5.2% never vote.

TABLE 5
I VOTE IN LOCAL ELECTIONS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes, always	92	68.1	68.1	68.1
Sometimes	36	26.7	26.7	94.8
Never	7	5.2	5.2	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 6
I VOTE IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes, always	95	70.4	70.4	70.4
Sometimes	30	22.2	22.2	92.6
Never	10	7.4	7.4	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

TABLE 7
I VOTE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes, always	99	73.3	73.3	73.3
Sometimes	29	21.5	21.5	94.8
Never	7	5.2	5.2	100.0
Total	135	100.0	100.0	

Considering the combined responses of respondents who confirmed that they always or sometimes vote in elections, a slightly higher turnout (94.8%) was confirmed for presidential and local elections compared to parliamentary elections (92.6%). Lastly, in response to the last question about personal political engagement, 7.4% of respondents answered positively, while 12.6% considered it. The rest of the respondents are not personally engaged nor considering it.

User engagement in political communication on SNS and voter turnout

By examining individual and cumulative data on voter turnout of respondents, there is a disproportion compared to the level of user engagement in political communication on social networking sites. For comparison, we will consider that the highest (51.1%) expressed user engagement

in following the posts of political actors, and the lowest (68%) expressed voter turnout related to local elections. A clear percentage difference (16,9%) is a sufficient argument for rejecting the third hypothesis (H3. The level of user engagement in the context of political communication on SNS is consistent with voter turnout in the real world).

Discussion and Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from results of this study aligns with some of the previous research^{23,25}, indicating that popular political actors primarily use their SNS profiles to broadcast information rather than engage in two-way communication with users. This implies that the number of followers is irrelevant if they do not engage with other users, which aligns with the two-step flow model.

Given that all hypotheses in this study were rejected, several relevant questions for future research arise. The absence of statistically significant differences in the level of user satisfaction with the communication of political actors on SNS should be viewed from multiple perspectives. Although this data might initially appear positive, it is more realistically attributed to user disinterest. There are several reasons for this, with the first being the assessment of satisfaction levels, leaving room for improvement in the communication of political actors. The preferences of users who consciously transition from active audiences to passive recipients of information within political communication on SNS are of particular concern. This represents a negative trend where users find satisfaction in passive consumption of content by preferentially following the posts of political actors rather than engaging with other users or directly communicating with political actors. Furthermore, the degree of user engagement in political communication on SNS does not exhibit congruence with voter turnout in the real world. In fact, it's lower.

The results of this study indicate specific trends among social media users in Croatia. However, due to the limited sample size and many respondents with higher education levels, caution should be exercised in drawing general conclusions regarding the overall population of SNS users. Future research should delve deeper into analyzing the reasons behind the relatively low engagement of users concerning political communication with other users and direct communication with political actors on social SNS and other social media.

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POLITIKA NA DRUŠTVENIM MREŽAMA: KOMUNIKACIJA I IZBORNA PARTICIPACIJA IZ PERSPEKTIVE ZADOVOLJSTVA KORISNIKA

SAŽETAK

U radu se analizira zadovoljstvo korisnika komunikacijom političkih aktera na društvenim mrežama iz perspektive teorije koristi i zadovoljstva te modela dvostupanjskog tijeka informacija. Istražene su preferencije i angažman korisnika u kontekstu političke komunikacije na društvenim mrežama, a potom su rezultati uspoređeni s iskazanom izbornom participacijom u stvarnom svijetu. U svrhu istraživanja kreiran je anonimni anketni upitnik, a kvantitativno istraživanje provedeno je na nasumičnom uzorku od 135 ispitanika. Analizom rezultata nisu utvrđene statistički značajne razlike u razini zadovoljstva korisnika komunikacijom političkih aktera na društvenim mrežama u odnosu na socio-demografske značajke ispitanika. Nadalje, rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da korisnici društvenih mreža preferiraju pasivno praćenje objava političkih aktera u odnosu na komunikaciju s drugim korisnicima i izravnu komunikaciju s političkim akterima. Naposljku, uvrđen je niži angažman korisnika u kontekstu političke komunikacije na društvenim mrežama u odnosu na stvarnu izbornu participaciju sudionika ovog istraživanja

