

Social Media's Sociopolitical Influence on Users



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Abstract

This study aims to examine and understand how social media (SM) platforms affect users ages 17-27 years political orientations when used or happened upon as news sources. The study employed a survey designed to gather data on the 18 voluntary participants concerning their individual experiences with SM pertaining to political and social news. The data collected surrounding SM use were emotional ratings, use of popular platforms, types of issues faced, change of thought, and effects on political opinion. The findings were as-is: One-third of the respondents found one or more of either oppression, an overwhelming amount of content, poorly backed up claims, foul words (slurs, backlash, threats, etc.), or forms of clickbait to be an issue they faced while viewing political or social topics on SM. These interactions and other causes changed multiple aspects of the users' experience surrounding political socialization.

Keywords

Political socialization, user, news sources, user experience, platforms, social media

Introduction

The ways news and opinions spread are rapid in the fast-evolving world of technology. One of the main ways these are spread is on social media. SM as a news source presents many complicating factors such as censorship, monetization of views, clickbait, new forms of protest, anonymity, higher engagement, etc. (Humphreys, pp. 277-279, 2016; Humphreys, Chapter 13, 2016; Lane, 2020; Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin, 2022). These issues can cause pressure on everyday users as they are shown politically motivated content for reasons ranging from election information and electoral candidate promotion to political activism and spreading awareness, and many in between. The purpose of this study is to examine the orientational and emotional effects of these factors on SM users ages 17 to 27. This topic was chosen based on the rising use of SM during the SARS-Covid 19 pandemic and the exponentially growing bi-partisan separation of American politics as tension rises with civil rights and abuse movements, especially since they are centered around online action.

Literature Review

Some of the first moves in politics involving the use of SM began with candidates for the U.S. presidential elections such as John Kerry (2004) and Barack Obama (2008) as well as Vermont Governor, Howard Dean, elected in 1991 (Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin, pp. 599-600, 2022). A study surrounding this topic, Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin, 2022, had analyzed just how SM may affect the outcomes of elections and the peoples' political orientations, and the policies and campaigns of parties. There is a worldwide use of SM that has extrapolated democratic power among the people but also allowed for censorship and even dilution of activism in some instances, usually dependent on geography among other factors (p. 601). Nonetheless, increases in engagement are encouraged by private organizations and

communities on the internet ranging in agendas (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube). Inconsistent, meager, and typically exclusively remote activism has inclined due to constant exposure causing an increase in the quantity of engagement as easier forms of activism are popularized. Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin (2022) focused on factors that played into voting patterns among SM users and found that factors such as political affiliation, political disposition, age, gender, religion, preferred SM, connections with activists, online and offline participation, and time on SM were responsible.

Mitchel et al. (2020) collected data surrounding the engagement of different political sources. The conclusion was that those who use SM as a preferred news source often are less engaged, and lack the awareness that others may have. More precisely, participants' attestation of exposure to false information and lack of productive political information, and exceedingly low scores on political knowledge tests that were presented by the study, which were conducted by the PEW Research Center, show just how detrimental the sole use of SM as a news source can be. These questions contained hot points and major events in politics to gauge the knowledge held by the participants. Those who used news website or apps and cable television (exclusively cable, as local television scored oppositely) as their main source received higher scores on the knowledge tests and attested to lower exposure of false information.

While the use of SM, in general, can be detrimental to both the mental health of users and their awareness, it provides more socialization and learning opportunities than organizations such as schools or political socialization through the means of parents, though parent-to-child political discussions procured significantly more engagement than during school (Quintelier, 2015). The same study noted that due to the increased interaction of peers on the internet, where political topics are spoken about, there is a natural increase in exposure as internet use rises. Interaction

and exposure can be beneficial as that is how growth is encouraged and opinions are formed, but over-exposure can lead to a dilution of good exposure. This study addressed the internet, not just SM, and as we see in Mitchell et al. (2020), various sources on the internet provide hugely different information. Additionally, less peer interaction on social media and more with larger influencers may prove different in terms of promoting engagement, as the latter was less focused on in the article.

Lane (2020) addressed the perceived (personal) and actual (expressed) digital citizenship norms of youth (18-24 years of age). Understanding these norms and how they have changed over the years is crucial to connecting factors such as level of SM use, level of expression related to norms, demographics related to norms, and values of the newer age of users. Lane found that the more the users were exposed to political expression online as something a “good citizen ought to do,” the more they began to engage and express themselves politically on SM. While exposure can be heckling for users, it is important to realize that many of those doing the heckling (i.e. activists) have important causes they want to reach people with. This can enlighten and lead to a change of thought that would have otherwise never occurred in a more stable news source, hence a reason for progressivism on such a large scale.

Ekström (2016) delves into the reasoning behind why young persons engage or disengage from talking about politics. Ekström finds that many participants in the study describe themselves as politically active to their peers when they were discussing political topics together. Despite this fact, they were not engaging in any political activity or programs outside of the study. Furthermore, the diversity of the group tended to be a factor in the engagement of political talk, which can be prevalent on SM. Discussions of politics or social issues can be quite taboo even as they are a vital piece of democratic health in a country. There often needs to be a

catalyst, someone, or something to start the conversation. The concern of issues on SM can be spread through awareness and it summons these conversations, leading to a higher rate of discussion.

Social roles play a large part in how information is dealt with and received on SM networks (Humphreys, p. 177, 2016). Often, as aforementioned, a catalyst is needed to draw attention to an issue or topic. This catalyst can seem to be an event, and partly is, but the person or persons exercising the power of SM to publicize the piece of news or opinion on the matter is the reason the message has spread as far as to become a cause for concern. There are those who sabotage or spread false information, often under fake accounts or “sock puppet” aliases in user communities for destructive purposes and to avoid being scrutinized for engaging in the activity they are (p. 179). The issue of anonymity and the ability to appear different or more credible on the internet gives influencers of false information, hate groups, or even politicians themselves more power to pollute users' feeds and overwhelm them with information. This can cause many of the negative emotions that participants of this survey attested to having (see table 1).

While SM may be a comfortable place for some to discuss and express their political thoughts with a favorable group of people, others may find their comfort levels differ. Humphreys (ch. 13, 2016) outlines the dissimilar roles it can play at varying levels of power, but also roles may vary based on geography, socioeconomic status of the users, and other demographics. Whether it is a haven and a ticket out of a corrupt government, a place where persons of all ages may scroll for hours and be exposed to intense political content coming from a variety of sources, or a vehicle (one that in some cases is restricted) for power and fear, SM is relevant in today's politics. Censorship is a powerful tool used by countries such as China and Egypt where totalitarian power has had its rule, but also in the U.S. where freedom and order are

consistently weighed against each other to find balance (p. 237). Censorship or a lack thereof can cause major changes to exposure, especially on SM where news may already be unstable in terms of trustworthiness (Mitchel et al., 2020).

Methods

This study employed a survey based on rating scales (e.g. “Extremely;” “very;” “somewhat;” “barely;” “not at all”) and examined those ages 17-27 years. The questions were formatted similarly with only slight, but necessary deviations in the wording of the answers. The purpose of this was to provide a clear format for the participants. Two out of the five non-demographical questions were multiple choice to gather types of SM used, and then effects experienced in the past three months from political topics on SM. The other three were single choice and aimed at gathering the emotions and change of thought (implying an effect) in the past three months. All questions that were non-demographic were related to the last three months to remain relative and ensure conciseness for the participants.

The demographics of the participants were particularly consistent being mostly White persons, women, adolescents, and those residing in North America. More specifically, races/ethnic backgrounds held by those that participated consisted of White (61 percent), Asian (22 percent), Hispanic/Latinx (6 percent), Pacific Islander (6 percent), and those identifying as “other” (6 percent). This is believed to be reflective of the populations sampled from in some ways, but is lacking in others, especially diversity of minorities relative to the Green River College population.

Age specifics are as follows: ages 17-21 years (89 percent) and those aged 22-27 years (11 percent) were the two age groups collected. The cause for this cannot be clearly defined as

younger candidates being more willing to participate but the populations sampled from can explain these demographics.

Those identifying as women (78 percent) and men (22 percent) were the only genders of participants; There were no responses from other gender identities. This may be due to women being more willing to participate, but conclusions cannot be definitively drawn.

The sample was taken in Washington, U.S., so it is self-evident that most were in North America (94 percent), while one was also located in the Pacific Islands (6 percent) in addition to North America, and one participant in Asia (6 percent).

Participants were either employed (including students) (full-time, 17 percent; part-time, 44 percent), unemployed students (33 percent), and unemployed and not in school (6 percent). The unemployed and uneducated participant cannot be easily explained as the two sample populations were employees or students themselves, given the setting they were sampled from (see below).

As for education, there were those who had some highschool education (28 percent), Those with HS diploma or GED/ Equivalent (22 percent), and those take credits toward their first two years in college (50 percent). The latter two demographics can also be explained by the populations sampled from.

The collection of participants began by sending out a survey to the students of the class this study was designed for, Social Media Communications 213 at Green River College (Spring, 2022). To gather a broader range of participants, employees of a café were invited to take the survey. A final count of 18 SM users was collected and completed the survey. As for stipulations involved in participation, the users must have been between the age range of 17-27 years of age

and be users of social media. There was no need to drop any of the participants for failure to meet these requirements.

Considerations for stricter stipulations were present in earlier, planning stages of the study. These were decided against because the age ranges collected (when predicted and expressed from results) were reflective of the desired target population. The same reasoning was used for location restrictions, or lack thereof; The collected sample presented no major differences to the target population. Income range, for example, was not a factor much like many other common control factors not in this study because it was designed to be general and focused more on the experiences of the users rather than the identity of users. This is, again, apart from age and basic social media use requirements.

Results

(Q7)¹ The most used platforms to “view or learn about political topics (theories, news, findings, events, opinions, activism, etc.)” are Instagram and TikTok. Following at about half of the usage of the latter two are Facebook and Youtube. Others consisting of Snapchat subscriptions, Twitter, and podcasts.

Results of the survey clearly show the effects social media has on users, and which ones it affects more. As seen in Table 1, there is a wide range of negative experiences having to do with politics on SM. **(Q8)** A steady number of participants attested to experience one or more of each of the following: poorly backed up political/ social/ health information (33 percent), an overwhelming amount of content (44 percent), foul play/ wording, especially on serious issues (backlash, threats, offensive language, etc.) (33 percent), Click bait (falsely presented

¹ Q(x): referring to question number on survey.

political/social information in thumbnail) (44 percent), and oppression/ discrimination (39 percent). This suggests that these are common among the participants' population (i.e. mostly women, those ages 17-21, White individuals, etc.).

(Q9) This data is reflected by the high scores for difficulty being present on SM where 61 percent of participants felt that these issues made it equal to or more than "somewhat difficult." Interestingly, none attested to their experiences being "extremely difficult" (the rating just above the latter rating). This may indicate that there is a tolerance for SM's negative effects because the reasoning to use it is perceived to be greater. In other words, there is a great, but not completely influential difficulty, and despite this, there is widespread use of SM.

Intolerance in the form of frustration, influence of opinions due to "difficulty" levels mentioned above, and change of opinions all based on political and social matters in the past three months was clear. **(Q11)** Many respondents stated that their frequency of frustration with political or social topics on SM were moderate to very often ("moderate", 39 percent; "often", 11 percent; "very often", 22 percent). The others were not as frustrated ("not much," 16 percent; "not at all", 11 percent). This split signifies both higher stress politics in SM causes and more volatile rates of engagement among those who express more stress, as this proves to encourage or discourage their motivation (Ekström, 2016; Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin, 2022; Lane, 2020; Quintelier, 2015). **(Q10)** Influence from these emotions on opinions are seen to be strong at 94 percent ("extremely," 33 percent; "Somewhat," 44 percent; "barely," 17 percent) saying they were, and only 6 percent saying they were not at all influenced. **(Q12)** Those who attested to direct change in their personal political opinions from difficulties, such as the ones mentioned, were also proportioned at 94 percent and respectively, 6 percent saying they did not change (extremely, 17 percent; Somewhat, 44 percent; barely, 33 percent).

Discussion

It can be concluded that the effects SM has on adolescents' emotions, political views, and engagement are significant. Attribution to this conclusion is namely based off the results of all non-demographic questions (**Q7-Q12**), but namely questions 9 through 12. **Q7** and **Q8** supplemented the foundation for the data collected from the other 3 questions by helping to understand the habits of the users. Habits form based on and from factors such as identity, homelife, environment, types of media used, geography, culture, and other surroundings (Ekström, 2016; Humphreys, 2016; Kofi Frimpong, Nyame, & Hossin, 2022; Lane, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2020; Quintelier, 2015).

It is important to note that the size of this study would need to be scaled up and/or balanced better to achieve stronger data. Further research is required for specific effects from being apart of subcategories based on socioeconomic status, as that was not the purpose of this study, but closely related. Future research on this topic could provide deeper understanding of why some populations were less affected, or affected differently by SM politics.

Given the circumstances including time allotted for the study, sample populations, feedback given, and general process it was conducted, much was learned. Growth not only took place in the knowledge surrounding politics on SM but in research and documenting in general. Given that there is more research to be done, it is definite that studies to come will be more professionally conducted.

The sources referenced in this study gave an outline on how to perform quantitative studies using surveys on specific populations, among other helpful information. Some provided data more closely related to the research question, but others supplemented background knowledge, enabling a wider understanding while constructing this study. The success of this trial was

evident and though limitations and therefore data gaps were present, it only creates room for further research.

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Tables

Table 1

Q8: In the last three months, have you often felt affected by any of the following on social media while viewing political content?

Political/ Social Issues Faced on Social Media	% of Respondents
An overwhelming amount of content, especially pertaining to the partisan divide in America.	44.4%
Oppression based on personal attributes (race, appearance, gender, sexuality, religion)	39%
Click bait (falsely presented political/social information in thumbnail)	44%
Foul play/ wording, especially on serious issues (backlash, threats, offensive language, etc.)	33%
Poorly backed up information that should be backed by official research (medical advice/news, sociological claims, etc.)	33%

- Poorly backed up information th... 6
- Overwhelming amount of conte... 8
- Foul play/ wording, especially o... 6
- Click bait (falsely presented poli... 8
- Oppression based on personal a... 7



Table 2

Q9: How difficult have these issues made it to be present online in terms of stress, anxiety, or other negative emotions?

● Extremely difficult	0
● Somewhat difficult	11
● Neutral	4
● Somewhat not difficult	1
● Extremely not difficult	2



Table 3

Q10: Do you believe that these emotions influence your opinions of social or political matters?

● Extremely	6
● Somewhat	8
● Barely	3
● Not at all	1



Table 4

Q11: In the last three months, how often were you frustrated with social or political news you saw on your social media feed?

● Not at all	2
● Not much	3
● Moderately	7
● Often	2
● Very often	4



Table 5

Q12: In the last three months, how have you changed your thinking due to this type of content on social media?

● Extremely	3
● Somewhat	8
● Barely	6
● Not at all	1

