Cyber-Politics: Social Media's Influence on Political Mobilization

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Abstract

Commencing with the recognition of social media's profound impact on political mobilisation, this research seeks to conduct an in-depth investigation into the intricate relationship between social media and political engagement, acknowledging the significant influence of digital platforms on civic participation. Employing a methodologically rigorous mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis and secondary data for quantitative analysis, the study systematically examines the nuanced dynamics of political discourse, information dissemination, and network structures within major social media domains. Guided by Social Movement Theory, the theoretical framework illuminates the instrumental role played by online communities and influencers in shaping contemporary political movements. Preliminary findings emphasize the pivotal contribution of social media to information dissemination, community-building endeavours, and activist initiatives. However, the research also identifies challenges related to misinformation and polarization, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted relationship between social media and political engagement. Aligned with a referenced study, this research enhances understanding of the influence exerted by digital spaces on civic engagement, providing a holistic examination of policy discourse, information distribution, and network structures across major social media channels. Establishing a foundation for future research, the study offers pragmatic insights to policymakers, facilitating the discerning utilization of social media platforms for constructive mobilization while mitigating deleterious consequences in the contemporary digital milieu.

Keywords: social platform, political impact, connectivity, information, participation

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Introduction

Social media refers to digital platforms that facilitate the creation, dissemination, and exchange of information and content within virtual communities. These platforms create a participatory online environment where users generate and share content interactively. Social media platforms play a crucial role in facilitating organization and coordination for political mobilization. The interactive nature of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allows for the rapid dissemination of information, aiding in the organization of political events and movements (Castells, 1996; Newson et al., 2008). Through features like event creation, group formation, and instant messaging, social media enables activists to coordinate efforts efficiently. The Arab Spring, for instance, witnessed the extensive use of social media in organizing protests and disseminating information, showcasing the platforms' ability to facilitate collective action (Breuer, 2012). Social media platforms serve as a powerful megaphone for both individuals and organized groups, amplifying their voices and messages on a global scale (Boulianne, 2016). Users can share their political views, opinions, and calls to action with a broad audience, breaking traditional communication barriers. This phenomenon is evident in the Black Lives Matter movement, where social media acted as both an amplifier and a mobilizer, allowing the movement's message to reach a global audience (Ottaway & Hamzawy, 2011).

Social media actively contributes to boosting civic participation by providing users with accessible platforms for engagement. Users can express their political opinions, engage in discussions, and participate in online movements, fostering a sense of political consumerism (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). The level of political interest influences the extent of user engagement with political content on social media, emphasizing its role in encouraging civic participation (Barnidge, 2021). This engagement is crucial in shaping the digital public sphere and broadening political discourse (Bode, 2012). Social media platforms play a pivotal role in framing political debates by influencing how individuals engage with political content. The digital age has transformed how people access and consume political information, with social media serving as a primary source of news for a substantial portion of the population (Newman, 2021). The filter bubble phenomenon, where algorithms tailor content to users' preferences, can contribute to the framing of political debates by selectively exposing users to information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011). This selective exposure raises questions about the diversity and balance of political perspectives encountered on social media platforms.

Social media, encompassing digital platforms facilitating the creation, dissemination, and exchange of information within virtual communities, has become a pivotal force in contemporary political communication. Operating in diverse modes, from one-to-one interactions to reaching broad audiences, social media serves as a dynamic channel for the rapid circulation and amplification of political messages. Its influence on public discourse and political opinions is undeniable, playing a multifaceted role in shaping the global political landscape. Over the past two decades, the global movement of social media has triggered a seismic shift in the trajectory of global politics. The transformative impact of platforms like Twitter, now named X, and Facebook on events like the Arab Spring and the

Black Lives Matter movement underscores their reach and profound influence. This study embarks on a global exploration, transcending geographical boundaries to unravel the complexities of the relationship between social media and political mobilization

As the focus narrows to the unique context of Nepal, nestled against the Himalayan backdrop, the narrative of social media's influence on political mobilization takes on a nuanced character. In this dynamic setting, the digital landscape has not only shaped political discourse but also redefined civic engagement. However, this evolution is not without challenges and opportunities. The statement of the problem stems from the imperative to discern the nuanced ways in which social media contributes to and hinders political mobilization within the specific context of Nepal. Conventional political participation or mobilization is conspicuously absent from the discourse, emphasizing the need to conceptualize these notions in the digital age. The ideal situation envisions social media as an unequivocally positive force for political mobilization, but the problem lies in multifaceted challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and the potential for divisive uses of online platforms.

The solution lies in a thorough study that bridges existing gaps in understanding the multifaceted impact of social media on political mobilization. This research aims to provide insights at both the global level and within the unique socio-political tapestry of Nepal, informing strategies for constructive mobilization amidst the challenges presented. Thus, this study is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary endeavour to comprehend, navigate, and harness the evolving dynamics of social media's role in shaping political movements in our digital age. The objective is to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the global and national implications of social media in political mobilization, offering pragmatic insights for policymakers and stakeholders in navigating this complex landscape.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to thoroughly explore how social media has transformed political mobilization. Using a comparative approach, it analyses diverse scholarly works to provide a nuanced understanding of this impact. The review critically assesses theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, incorporating different types of literature, such as theoretical, empirical, and analytical studies. By scrutinizing methodologies and findings, the review offers a comprehensive view of social media's role in civic engagement. It lays the foundation for the current study by connecting to various research methods, informing the theoretical framework, and contributing to the understanding of the variables to be measured. In the dynamic landscape of contemporary society, the rise of social media has heralded a transformative era, fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of communication, and redefined the boundaries of civic engagement. Social media, represented by diverse interactive platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, emerges as a revolutionary force, empowering users to seamlessly generate, share, and exchange content.

Social media, at its core, represents a dynamic constellation of virtual spaces designed to facilitate the creation and dissemination of user-generated content (Castells, 1996; Newson et al., 2008). This interactive nature has proven instrumental in shaping public discourse and

fostering an environment conducive to the exchange of ideas. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter played pivotal roles in galvanizing citizens, coordinating protests, and disseminating information during socio-political movements like the Arab Spring (Breuer, 2012; Ottaway & Hamzawy, 2011). Social media acts as a catalyst, amplifying voices, fostering collective identity, and serving as a conduit for politically charged content. The frequency of social media use reflects individuals' immersion in the digital sphere, with higher frequency indicating more active participation (Kim, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). The type of social media used shapes the nature and scope of online engagement, influencing the reach and format of political content (Hardy, 2009; Lim, 2012). Metrics such as the number of political groups or pages followed and engagement with political content provide insights into individuals' active participation and the depth of their involvement in political discourse (Lim, 2012; Howard, 2012; Gastil, 2008; Harlow, 2011).

The transformative influence of social media on political mobilization globally finds its theoretical underpinning in the Social Movement Theory, which explains how collective action arises from social structures and interactions (Goh, 2016). These platforms act as catalysts for movements, facilitating communication, organization, and information dissemination (Bode, 2012). Social media's influence on political engagement spans generations, as evident in studies on generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement (Andersen et al., 2020). Online communities, often formed around shared political ideologies, play a vital role, serving as spaces for discourse and activism (Boulianne, 2016). Influencers with a significant online following shape political narratives and influence civic engagement (Bode, 2012; Becker & Copeland, 2016).

The viral spread of misleading information can have profound consequences for the effectiveness and legitimacy of political movements (Bode, 2012).

Social media platforms are pivotal in shaping the dynamics of political discourse and influencing how individuals engage with political content (Boulianne, 2016). The digital age has transformed how political information is accessed and consumed, with social media serving as a primary news source for a substantial portion of the population (Newman, 2021). Individuals often encounter political information incidentally while engaging with non-political content, impacting political engagement and attitudes (Kim, 2013; Barnidge, 2021). The filter bubble phenomenon, where algorithms tailor content to users' preferences, raises questions about the diversity and balance of political perspectives on social media, potentially reinforcing echo chambers and polarization (Pariser, 2011; Boulianne, 2016).

Political discourse on social media goes beyond information consumption to active user engagement, with users participating in discussions, expressing political opinions, and contributing to the interactive nature of platforms (Bode, 2012). Political consumerism, where individuals use social media to support or boycott causes, is relevant to understanding user engagement (Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). The level of political interest influences the extent of user engagement with political content (Barnidge, 2021), and social media platforms provide opportunities for users to engage with political issues through comments, likes, shares, and participation in online movements (Bode, 2012).

The formation of online political communities is crucial in political discourse on social media, with users joining groups, following pages, or connecting with like-minded individuals (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). These online communities function as spaces for collective identity formation, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose (Bode, 2012). Influencers, individuals with a substantial following, play a central role in shaping online political communities (Becker & Copeland, 2016), influencing the political views and actions of their audience.

Recent studies underscore the pivotal role of social media in information dissemination and community building (Ahmed et al., 2021). Platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable real-time updates on political events, contributing to the creation of online communities where individuals engage in political discourse and activism (Boulianne, 2016). While social media catalyzes activism and civic engagement (Boulianne, 2020), challenges such as misinformation security and privacy concerns pose significant threats to the integrity of political discourse on these platforms (Ahmed et al., 2021; Gordo, 2020). Users' exposure to information aligning with existing beliefs raises concerns about the quality and diversity of information encountered on social media, emphasizing the need to address these challenges for a healthy online political environment (Boulianne, 2016; Pariser, 2011; Shah, 2007).

Exploring Opportunities

Nepal, nestled against the Himalayas, experiences a distinctive evolution of social media's impact on political mobilization. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube facilitate global connectivity, enabling cross-border influence and the sharing of diverse perspectives (Gundelach, 2020). This offers opportunities for global collaboration and learning from international political movements. The digital landscape in Nepal not only influences political discourse but also empowers youth and encourages participation. Social media platforms provide a space for young individuals to voice their opinions, fostering a sense of agency and activism (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Understanding these opportunities for youth engagement is crucial for leveraging the potential of social media for constructive mobilization.

The existing literature on the impact of social media on political mobilization reflects diverse perspectives. Boulianne (2016) emphasizes the positive influence of social media platforms, highlighting their role in civic awareness and engagement. According to Boulianne, these digital spaces serve as dynamic arenas for information dissemination and community building, contributing to the empowerment of individuals in the political sphere. Conversely, studies like that of Ahmed et al. (2021) delve into nuanced aspects of gender inequality in online political engagement, shedding light on potential challenges and disparities within social media-driven political movements. The themes explored encompass information dissemination, community building, activism, and challenges associated with misinformation and polarization. Bode's (2012) work highlights the potential for activism and youth empowerment facilitated by social media, a positive narrative echoed by Boulianne (2020), emphasizing the positive impact of digital media on civic and political participation.

Methodological approaches adopted in these studies vary, reflecting the complexity of the research topic. Bode's (2012) quantitative analysis of online social networking patterns stands in contrast to Ahmed et al.'s (2021) qualitative content analysis, which focuses on gender dynamics in online political engagement. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods, as advocated by Creswell and Creswell (2017), is evident, enhancing the comprehensiveness and validity of the findings. Critical evaluation reveals methodological considerations and gaps that warrant attention. While the mixed-methods approach is prevalent, variations in the depth and execution of analysis exist. Some studies, like Boulianne (2016), provide extensive qualitative content analysis, offering rich insights into user engagement. Gordo's (2020) exploration of digital media touches upon security and privacy concerns, signaling a gap in the literature requiring a comprehensive investigation to inform strategies for safeguarding democratic processes. Controversies surrounding algorithmic biases and their potential impact on political engagement are areas that necessitate further exploration. Pariser's (2011) concept of the "filter bubble" highlights concerns related to selective exposure, urging a critical examination of the algorithms governing information flow on social media platforms.

The literature review navigates through factors influencing political engagement, challenges, and opportunities presented by social media. It connects these insights to the specific context of Nepal, emphasizing global connectivity, youth empowerment, and the distinctive evolution of digital politics in the region. Drawing on the reviewed literature, this study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of social media's impact on political mobilization. By incorporating the unique socio-political context of Nepal, the research extends beyond the current literature, offering a contextualized analysis of how online platforms shape political movements in the region. This work synthesizes findings, utilizes varied theoretical frameworks, and departs from previous studies by addressing underexplored dimensions, thereby contributing to the evolving discourse on the intersection of social media and political engagement.

Methods

The research design and methodology of the study employ a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative content analysis and secondary data analysis. This combination was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influence of social media on political mobilization. To thoroughly explore the dynamics of political discourse, information dissemination, and network structures within major social media platforms, a mixed-methods approach is deemed most effective. This approach allows for the triangulation of findings, enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative content analysis involves the systematic examination and interpretation of textual, visual, or audio data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Mayring, 2015). In the context of this research, qualitative content analysis is utilized to delve into the content shared on social media platforms. It enables a nuanced exploration of political discourse and activism, capturing the qualitative aspects of user engagement. Secondary data analysis involves the use of existing data collected for a different purpose but relevant to the current research objectives (Heaton, 2004). This study

incorporates secondary data analysis to leverage pre-existing datasets related to social media usage, political movements, and network structures. It provides a broader temporal and contextual understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The integration of both qualitative content analysis and secondary data analysis is synergistic. Qualitative analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and expressions on social media, while secondary data analysis facilitates a broader examination of trends and patterns over time.

Data Presentation

The role of political social media in political mobilization marks a paradigm shift, ushering in a transformative era in communication dynamics (Castells, 1996; Newson et al., 2008). This influence extends globally, shaping public discourse and serving as a dynamic virtual space for interactive content generation and exchange (Castells, 1996; Newson et al., 2008).

Global Mobilization and Social Media

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter played crucial roles in global socio-political movements, exemplified by the Arab Spring, where citizens mobilized, protests organized, and political change propagated through information dissemination (Breuer, 2012; Ottaway & Hamzawy, 2011). Platforms like Instagram and YouTube facilitate cross-border collaboration, enabling the exchange of diverse perspectives (Gundelach, 2020).

Online Political Communities

Political discourse on social media is characterized by active user engagement, with users participating in discussions and sharing content, contributing to the interactive nature of these platforms (Bode, 2012). Online communities, often centered around shared political ideologies, serve as virtual spaces for collective identity formation, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

Challenges of Political Social Media

The multifaceted nature of political social media introduces challenges such as misinformation and polarization, emphasizing the need for careful examination (Ahmed, 2019). The swift dissemination of misleading information has profound consequences for the efficacy and legitimacy of political movements (Bode, 2012).
In Nepal, the impact of social media on political mobilization assumes a nuanced character, shaping political discourse and redefining civic engagement, particularly among the youth (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Social media platforms provide substantive space for young individuals in Nepal to articulate their opinions, fostering a sense of agency and activism. Discerning opportunities for youth engagement becomes imperative for constructive mobilization (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

Social Media Use and Political Mobilization

Examining the influence of offline media use on political mobilization through traditional channels showed a robust statistical explanation, accounting for 33.1% of the variance. The

impact of online media use, including news websites, YouTube, online forums, and social media posts, explained 30.3% of the variance, revealing a nuanced relationship influenced by media freedom.

Countries with higher media freedom showed a significant main effect, suggesting individuals were less likely to express an intention for political mobilization. However, an intriguing interaction effect emerged in countries with media restrictions, emphasizing the role of online media use coupled with low group efficacy. Both offline and online political activity models, explaining 33.1% and 30.1% of the variance, presented mostly nonsignificant individual relationships. However, a marginal significance in the interaction effect hinted at the nuanced influence of media freedom, with citizens in countries with greater media freedom exhibiting stronger intentions for future political mobilization

Global Influence of Social Media

The global political landscape has undergone a significant transformation owing to the influential role of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Events such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement serve as striking examples of the transformative power of these platforms (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Boulianne, 2016). During the Arab Spring, social media played a crucial role in facilitating the rapid dissemination of information, enabling the organization of protests, and coordinating dissenting voices, ultimately turning isolated grievances into a collective call for political reform (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). The brevity and immediacy of platforms like Twitter reshape the nature of political discourse, necessitating concise and impactful messages and contributing to the viral nature of content that can spark widespread political conversations.

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement effectively utilized platforms like Twitter to shed light on systemic racial injustices, mobilize support, and create a global dialogue around racial inequality (Boulianne, 2016). Social media became a virtual space where shared experiences united individuals in collective action, amplifying voices traditionally marginalized in mainstream discourse. However, challenges loom large on a global scale, with the prevalence of misinformation and the formation of online echo chambers limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011).

Challenges of Global Social Media Use

The challenges inherent to social media's role in political mobilization are conspicuous on the global stage, as identified by Ahmed et al. (2021). The prevalence of misinformation and polarization presents formidable obstacles to constructive mobilization efforts. Misinformation, in particular, has become a pervasive issue on social media platforms, influencing public opinion and subsequently shaping the political landscape (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Instances where false narratives gain traction can significantly impact public perception, ultimately influencing political outcomes.

The filter bubble, a phenomenon elucidated by Pariser (2011), compounds the challenges associated with misinformation. By creating personalized information environments, the filter bubble confines individuals to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, limiting

exposure to diverse perspectives. This selective exposure contributes to the polarization of opinions and hinders the formation of a well-informed and inclusive public discourse (Pariser, 2011). These challenges, on a global scale, underscore the critical need for comprehensive strategies. Strategies should not only leverage the potential of social media for constructive mobilization but also address issues related to information integrity and inclusivity. As political events increasingly unfold in the digital realm, the efficacy of political mobilization efforts is intricately linked to navigating these challenges on a global scale.

Nepal's Socio-Political Landscape and Social Media

The dominant social media platforms in Nepal are Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. These platforms serve as primary conduits for political expression and mobilization. Facebook, with its wide user base, emerges as a key player in shaping political narratives, while Twitter, with its real-time nature, becomes instrumental in rapid information dissemination. Instagram, although less predominant, is gaining traction, especially among the younger demographic, indicating a diverse landscape of social media usage for political engagement. However, this digital metamorphosis in Nepal is a double-edged sword.

While social media democratizes political participation, the undercurrents of digital divides, both in accessibility and literacy, pose significant challenges. The question of who holds the megaphone in the digital realm becomes paramount, urging a critical examination of the inclusivity of online political discourse. Without addressing these divides, there's a risk of consolidating digital spaces as exclusive domains, amplifying the voices of a privileged few, and stifling the democratic potential that social media promises.

 Moreover, the shadows of misinformation loom large over Nepal's digital landscape. As social media platforms become arenas for the clash of ideas, the battle against misinformation becomes central to the integrity of political mobilization. Navigating this landscape requires a delicate balance where freedom of expression is upheld but mechanisms are in place to curb the rampant spread of false information. The challenge lies in steering away from the formation of online echo chambers that perpetuate narrow narratives and distort public discourse. In essence, Nepal stands at the intersection of promise and peril in the digital age. The role of social media in political mobilization holds transformative potential, yet the journey demands a critical gaze. It necessitates strategic interventions to bridge digital divides, ensure inclusivity, and navigate the complex terrain of information integrity. Only through such a nuanced approach can Nepal fully harness the positive force of social media in shaping its political destiny.

Discussion

The findings align with the literature, emphasizing the continued significance of traditional offline media in shaping political mobilization intentions. The persistent influence of traditional media channels is highlighted, revealing that, even in the digital age dominated by social media, individuals in countries with higher media freedom who actively consume

offline media exhibit a heightened propensity for future political mobilization. This resonates with the broader discourse on the enduring impact of offline media in shaping civic engagement, as illuminated by the global and regional dynamics discussed in the literature review.

The intricate interplay of online media use and political mobilization intentions adds complexity to the narrative, aligning with the literature's emphasis on the multifaceted nature of political social media influence. The association of higher media freedom with a reduced likelihood of expressing intentions for political mobilization echoes the challenges outlined in the literature, including the prevalence of misinformation and the formation of online echo chambers. The literature review's call for nuanced strategies that leverage social media's potential for constructive mobilization while addressing challenges related to information integrity and inclusivity resonates with the discussion on online media use.

The findings contribute significantly to the evolving landscape of cyber-politics, emphasizing the critical role of media freedom in shaping the dynamics of political mobilization. This aligns with the literature's call for a comprehensive understanding that transcends the dichotomy of online and offline spheres. Media freedom emerges as a contextual factor influencing the effectiveness of both traditional and digital media in fostering civic engagement, validating the literature's emphasis on the importance of navigating challenges on a global scale. It analyses nuanced dimensions such as the frequency of social media use, types of platforms employed, nature of political content shared, and engagement metrics. This expansion resonates with the literature's recognition of the multifaceted landscape where digital platforms act as catalysts, shaping political engagement globally.

The frequency of social media use as a pivotal factor influencing political mobilisation aligns with the literature's acknowledgement of the transformative force of social media. The findings highlight the evolving preferences of users and the need for a nuanced understanding of audience dynamics, bridging global insights with local realities. This reflects the literature's emphasis on context-specific approaches tailored to the unique socio-political tapestry of each region, including Nepal. The challenges related to misinformation, echo chambers, and the role of online communities in mobilization efforts echo concerns and warrant strategic interventions. Therefore, it emphasizes the dual nature of social media's role in political mobilization, aligning with the literature's recognition of it as a potent force for democratization and civic engagement yet fraught with challenges.

Conclusion

This study thoroughly examines how social media influences political mobilization, considering both global trends and the specific socio-political context of Nepal. The literature review researches various theoretical frameworks and lessons from global events, highlighting social media's transformative impact while also acknowledging challenges like misinformation and polarization. Shifting the focus to Nepal, the research uncovers the nation's digital landscape, displaying social media's role in political expression and mobilization alongside challenges like digital divides and misinformation. By connecting

global insights with local realities, the study challenges the idea of a universal approach, providing practical suggestions. As the research concludes, it emphasizes the need for an adaptable and context-specific strategy for navigating the complex interplay of global dynamics and local realities, ensuring social media's potential in political mobilization aligns with democratic ideals.

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