



RESEARCH PAPER

Incidental Exposure to the Political Contents on Social Media and Political Participation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the association between incidental exposure on social media political contents and political participation. Social networking sites play an important role in political participation. While existing literature extensively explores the impact of social media on political engagement in Pakistan, there is a notable gap in understanding the influence of incidental exposure on social media on political participation. In this Research quantitative research design was used. A survey method was used to collect data from the chosen sample of 300 respondents. The data was collected online through purposive sampling. The findings of the study reveal that people mostly use YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, Incidental exposure on social media leads to political information acquiring and also leads people to participate in political activities. This study underscores their capacity to engage individuals previously disinterested in politics. These platforms emerge as catalysts for political involvement, particularly in the context of Pakistan

KEYWORDS Incidental Exposure, Offline Political Participation, Online Political Participation, Social Media

Introduction

Social networking sites expose people to numerous topics and types of contents – extending from entertainment contents to political contents – these contents can be consumed while using the same medium. Political information has become a substantial part of the social media platforms, but most of users of social media sites use these platforms for different purposes like interaction, marketing, etc. (Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2020; Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019). Although active use of social media platforms by the citizen promotes political information, yet these tools also enables unintentional experience to a different type of content. Some researchers investigated that usage of social media can be exposed to some content unintentionally. It happens when users expose some contents by chance. This exposure is called incidental exposure (Tewksbury, Weaver & Maddox, 2001).

Unintentional exposure also accrues on traditional media where people watch advertisement or news incidentally while watching entertainment shows. Still, on social media, this happens because of the diversity of the contents. Social media provides a variety of contents consumption where users have greater control over what they consume. For example, people watch entertainment content, news content, and information, and they expose political content while watching entertainment or educational shows on TV (Baum, 2002). These content exposure types are considered

undirected and passive exposure in those users who don't take actions to acquire particular information in mind (Bates, 2002). Side by side, various researchers have emphasized the possibility of these platforms to attain political information to those users who were politically uninterested (Matthes, Marquart & Sikorski, 2020; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

Incidental exposure is distinguished in two levels. First level of incidental exposure happens when people expose to such contents which are irrelevant to them, it is called negative (Information) exposure. Even yet, the goal-oriented use of media does not change but it leads to passive learning (Bode, 2016). Second level of incidental exposure is defined as when users incidentally expose to positive information. As a result, people develop a new objective and put more effort into acquiring information. In comparison to the first level learning through this kind of exposure is much stronger and it also increases the political participation among users. Incidental exposure to political content can happen if other than political objective and the particular political objectives are both met. thus, people may be exposed to political material by chance as a result of the moderation of social networking sites or just because of their social media presence or they can divert from their specific objective after exposing some content incidentally. In either case, this incidental exposure leads them to expose what they deliberately don not want to consume. Thus, it may claim that incidental exposure not only activate the political participation but it also diverts politically active users (Thorson and Wells, 2016).

People often have more control of what they access in high choice of media settings, such as the internet. The opportunity for incidental news exposure seems much less. This will create a situation where those people who are more interested in political activities will be much more educated, but those who have little interest will be left behind. It may be easy to reintroduce incidental exposure to those people who are uninterested in acquiring information through algorithmically driven tools such as social networking and search engines. For the basic explanation that these tools take some responsibility for what user see online. Heterogeneity of theses social media networks and poor links may have advantageous correlations with incidental exposure. Users of social media expose to news by accident in a variety of ways. Users may notice other users discussing news items or postings information about issues or events. They also see links to news items provided by third-party publishers, such as well-known digital, broadcast, and print publications. Social media sites offer some links as previews (containing text excerpts, headlines, and multimedia), implying that even if individuals do not click on the link, they are exposed to news information. Those who click on that links are exposed to totally different stories from what they want to see.

As mentioned above, incidental exposure to content happens by other means, social networking sites (Facebook, twitter and YouTube, etc.) may increase its probability and effectiveness for two basic reasons: "scalability (e.g., reach) of contents" (Boyd, 2010) and the structure of social media where variety of contents can be available more rapidly and take the attention of people. Even if social media users do not deliberately search political news while their contacts or their liked channels or pages post and exchange news and articles, there is a strong probability that users will experience those contents through their news feeds and/or through the internet and through comments. Likewise, another explanation is social aspect of social media attention to contents. Social reviews act as heuristics of the content's relevance, for example, contents suggested by friends or other channels or pages and how many times specific contents (videos, posts or pictures) have been posted, liked or shared.

Previous research reveals that, social suggestions enhance interest about news stories, affect the decisions of people on which type of information to consume, and also enable social media use for obtaining information (Turcotte et al, 2015; Anspach, 2017). These attributes mean that accidental news exposure was enhanced by social networking sites compared to other media such as text messages, print media and advertising. Furthermore, researchers investigated that new media use for actively information seeking increases participation in political activities among individuals (Muzaffar, Yaseen, Safdar, 2020; Marcelo, 2017; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zhang 2014; Yousif & ALSamydai, 2012; Fareed, Muzaffar, & Riaz, 2019). Most people use social media for their nonpolitical purposes such as social connection or entrainment purposes. Still, while using social media for nonpolitical reasons, they end up with participating in online political activities (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). This research attempts to discover current matters by keeping in view an incidental exposure to political contents, where people consume some contents while aiming to do something else. Moreover, this research will also examine in more detail that unintentional exposure to political contents will lead to information acquiring on social media. In addition, this research tries to find whether individuals participate in different online and offline political activities on these platforms after they are exposed to political contents on social media.

Literature Review

Before the popularity of the internet, academics debated on incidental exposure to television watching (Krugman & Hartley, 1970). The combination of the political and entertainment contents on television have shown both forms of contents to audience. The rise of social media environment questions this concept for instance. Incidental exposure should become less likely on social media because of variety of contents increase the probability that audience will find contents that best suit their needs (Prior, 2005).

One of the first studies on internet accidental exposure was conducted by Tewksbury et al. (2001) and concluded that internet has the ability to provide consumers with a range of information opportunities that reach well beyond what they are deliberately searching for. They said that incidental exposure occurs when "Individuals find information about the current affairs when Individuals have not been deliberately looking for it". Similarly, Antunovic, Parsons and Cooke (2018) also argued that people encounter information through incidental exposure. Other researchers also strengthen this notion that incidental exposure to current affairs information while people are not intended to seek that information (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018).

Previous research discovered that new media frequently gives individuals with news and information from politically diverse sources, and virtual social connections also perform a great part in selecting the information that people consume. As, individuals use social media for different reasons such as entrainment, education or information and it is not completely in control of what they consume, that's why the likelihood of incidental news exposure increases (Westwood, 2014). According to pew research (2021) 18 percent of social networking sites users in the America unfriended or unfollowed people because of political information they posted on their social media accounts. This shows that users have more control over what they consume in high choice media environment. People use new media for different reasons. Following on to underlying motives for individuals to come across contents related to politics on social media in an accidental manner. In the incidental mode, people who these social media platforms for non-political reasons are somehow come across political material. Though the findings show that this is true for entertainment motivation, but no influence was seen for self-expression or social connection motivations. Similarly intentional exposure

on social media predicts low level participation. Another research study Erdelez (2014) indicates that active ways of acquiring information and incidental exposure can be linked in a reciprocal way. Similarly, related exposure to some specific contents does not require prior attention for information needs, and it could be event-based. In addition, it enables users to acquire and seek information related to political content on social media platforms actively. Erdelez (2014) considered that incidental exposure is seen in the active search for information. For instance, when actively searching for information about an important event or issue, it is likely that people will find information related to non-event of issue. When this kind of incidental exposure occurs, the original information quest can stop. It can turn to that information discovered incidentally, facilitating information searching for the last subject at a later point as expected.

There are fundamental prospects that are important, first of all, Incidental exposure is treated by most scholars as dissimilar from deliberate exposure. Lee and Kim (2017) describe that there are two ways of obtaining political information: a person either searches for the contents or discovers it accidentally without any intention of doing so'. More precisely, if the user had the purpose of encountering some specific contents, exposure to that content is called deliberate. Incidental exposure, on the other hand, is defined by a lack of objective for exposure to the specific content. These specific processing objectives align with the approach to use and gratification (Rubin, 2009).

Furthermore, literature found that Incidental exposure was not proposed by scholars for political contents other than 'news'. For example, researchers asked from their respondents about news on political or public issues (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016) and, researchers just asked about "news which can include all sorts of news such as showbiz news, or lifestyle news or news related to games (Lee & Kim, 2017). This relatively denies the unique purpose of the concept: to clarify variables of the political outcome, for example the acquisition of Information about politics or participation in political activities. Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) also explained that how interactive media political information leads to the online political participation of users. But in their organizational concept of incidental, nonpolitical news was integrated.

Lastly, different researchers define incidental exposure on social media as a piece of encountering news or merely coming across information (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Matassi, 2018; Bergström & Belfrage, 2018) so that traditional operationalization of incidental exposure may be challenging. Did social media users read and acquire political information that was found incidentally? Or do high ratings on standard incidental exposure indicators just suggest that respondents have seen headlines briefly? In the available body of study, these questions have not been answered. While some qualitative studies suggest that individuals may remember social media may provide incidental encounters to political information (Bode, 2016; Lee & Kim, 2017). On the other hand, Oeldorf-Hirsch, (2018) have conducted an observational study and found no considerable association between Incidental exposure and political awareness. Opposite to this, Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) conducted cross-sectional surveys and found that incidental exposure impacts participation in political activities. Heiss and Matthes (2019) longitudinal survey indicates that incidental exposure also decrease engagement.

Similarly, in Pakistan citizen use social networking sites to acquire information related to politics and engage in different political activities (Riaz, 2010; Zaheer, 2016). Furthermore, Majid et al (2021) also concluded that social networking sites specially Facebook, play an important role in political participation in Pakistan. Although extensive literature examined the role of social media in political engagement and participation in Pakistan (Ahmad & Ittefaq, 2019; Masiha et al., 2018) but there is limited

literature available on role of incidental exposure on social media and political participations so that, this research tries to fill that gap in the context of Pakistan where people not only use media for information seeking but for other purposes such as, entertainment or educational purposes. There is possibility that use of media for other than political purpose can lead to political participations because easy access of information leads to political participation (Hamilton & Tolbert, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework of this study is based on campaign communication mediation model (OSROR) model, which has described media use and its effects on future response of users. It is broadly based on the Orientation-Stimulus-Reasoning Orientation-Response (OSROR) model which is basically stimulus and response where media exposure directly effects behavior of users. Previous researches have used OSROR as theoretical framework and concluded that use of media facilitates information seeking which further leads to participatory activities (Chan, 2016; Cho et al., 2009). Markus and Zanjoe (1985) further provide new communication mediation model (Orientation-Stimulus-Orientation-Response) where users' initial orientation to a stimulus leads to other Orientation which leads to future response basis on their psychological factor (Jung et al, 2011; Cho et al., 2009; Shah, Gotlieb, Hwang, Lee, Scholl & McLeod., 2007). Shah et al (2007) conducted research study on advertisement on social and traditional media, and they theorized all component of communication mediation model such as exposure to advertisement (O₁) or initial orientation facilitates information seeking or stimulus (S), which foster political participation (O₂) through discussion or political expression (R) through online and off line activities. Moreover, research explored that online exposure positively correlated with offline activities.

Based on previous literature this research study formulates O-S-O-R model as theoretical background. However, this model has been used in this domain of research. Still, the process of incidental exposure to social media political content facilitates online or offline political participation has not been examined. Respondent of this research may expose to political contents on social networking sites incidentally so this unintentional social media exposure to political contents is an initial orientation (O) that may foster information seeking (S) in respondents of this research. Based on previous research (Wang, Gabay, & Shah., 2012) this research considers that respondents' Active information seeking through social media on different political issues or events may leads them to Discuss political information (O) which may further facilitate response (R) in form of participation in different political activities.

Hypotheses

Based on the previous literature and proposed theoretical model this research formulates the following hypothesis:

- H: There is a positive correlation between use of social media and Incidental Exposure to political content on social media
- H1: There is a positive correlation between Incidental Exposure to political content on social media and Political Information Acquiring
- H2: There is a positive correlation between Information Acquiring through incidental exposure to social media political contents and online Political Participation
- H3: There is a positive correlation between Information Acquiring through incidental exposure to social media political contents and Offline Political Participation

Material and Methods

This is quantitative research in which correlation research design was used. This research design is usually used where research objectives are predictive such as measuring the relationship between two variables. This research study is concerned with finding co-relation between different variables such as incidental exposure to political contents, political information acquiring, and respondents' online and offline political participation. The data from the respondents will be collected through survey method. Questionnaire was used to gather the data from respondents. The population of this research study was the Multan City having age above 18. The questionnaire was prepared by using five points Likert scale. The researcher established the number of closed ended question items related to some variables. Respondents will be asked to answer the given question in five categories ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. (Wimmer & Dominik, 2014), Respectively, for other variables Question items was consisting on numerous responses on rating scale, that will be extending from Always to Never. Zaheer (2016) scale was used for measuring political participation of respondents. The rationale behind choosing this age group was that they can contribute in vote casting and could make change in political policies. The population of this research study was the Multan City having age above 18. The rationale behind choosing this age group was that they can contribute in vote casting and could make change in political policies. a sample of 300 respondents was taken from the population of Multan City having age above 18 by using purposive sampling. The data was collected physically from February 18th to March 1st through a well-designed questionnaire from the chosen sample of Multan city. After collecting data was entered in Statistical package for social science (SPSS) and after the screening of data Pearson correlation test was applied to test the relation among the variables.

Results and Discussion

Shamoo and Resnik (2008) define data analysis as a “process of systematically applying statistical and/or logical techniques to describe and illustrate, condense and recap, and evaluate data”. The collected data was entered in SPSS 22 (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences) software and was analyzed using this software. The analysis of the variables was presented in the form of frequency percentages and bivariate correlation tables.

Table 1: Frequency of using of Different Media

Items	Frequency percentages of respondent's usage of Different Media				
	Not at all	Little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Social Media Use	0	06	36	110	148
Television Watching	48	93	84	36	39
Radio Listening	213	45	18	06	18
Newspaper Reading	81	120	39	30	30

Table 1 shows the extent of using different medium. The overall respondents use social media very much as compared to television watching radio listening or newspaper reading. In term of other categories responding use social media much as compared to the television watching (36) radio listening and newspaper reading. This shows majority of the young adults mostly use social networking sites as compared to other media

Table 2
Frequency of using of Social Media

Items	Not at all	Little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Facebook usage	04	05	56	88	147
Twitter Usage	63	57	81	45	54
YouTube Usage	00	18	27	111	144
Instagram Usage	24	27	30	81	138

Table 2 depicts the extent of using different social media applications. The overall respondents use Facebook very much as compared to YouTube and Instagram and very little portion of the respondents use Twitter. Similarly, most of the respondents use YouTube in term of Much and very much categories as compared to other social media application which reveals that respondent prefer to use YouTube than Facebook, twitter and Instagram. This shows that mostly people use social Facebook and You Tube as compare and Instagram.

Table 3
Frequency of Different Purpose of using Social Media

Items	Frequency percentages of respondent's usage of Social Media				
	Not at all	little	Somewhat	Much	Very much
Entertainment purpose	06	15	18	123	138
Education purpose	05	15	67	149	64
Information purpose (Other than politics)	06	15	66	132	81
Connecting with Friends and family	03	21	51	103	122

Table Number 3 shows the percentage of respondents who use social media for various purposes. Respondents use social media for entertainment and to interact with friends and family very much as compared to education and information (other than politics) purposes. Moreover according to the results people use these platforms for entertainment purpose as compared to connecting with friends and family.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	1.00	2.00	1.4776	.50327
SM_USE	2.50	5.00	3.8489	.56514
IESM	1.00	5.00	2.7711	.97110
INF_AQ	1.67	5.00	3.3184	.90534
OPP	1.00	5.00	2.8657	1.02993
OFPP	1.00	5.00	2.4350	1.07004

SM_USE= Social media use, IESM= Incidental exposure to social media, INF_AQ= Information Acquiring, OPP= online political participation, OFPP= offline Political Participation

Table 4 demonstrate the descriptive statistics of variables its Rose the total number of variables, minimum and maximum ranges of different variables, mean and standard deviation of the different variables. It depicts that mean of gender is 1.47 and mean of social media use (SM_USE) is 3.84 and standard deviation is 856. Similarly, the mean of incidental exposure on social media (IESM) is 2.7 and standard deviation is .97.

Information acquiring (INF_AQ) scale mean is 3.37 and standard deviation is .90 and internal political efficacy (IPE) scale is 3.70 and standard deviation is 5.69, and external political efficacy (EPE) scale shows mean value 3.42 and standard deviation is 5.69. online political participation (OPP) mean is 2.86 and standard deviation is 1.02. Offline political participation (OFFPP) mean is 2.43 and standard deviation is point 1.07.

Table 5
Reliability analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
SMU	.807	11
IESM	.933	12
INF_AQ	.804	03
OPP	.941	08
OFFPP	.917	07

Table 5 shows the reliability analysis of variables. It depicts that social media use Cronbach's Alpha value is .807 and total Question items for measuring the variable were 11. Incidental exposure on social media Cronbach's Alpha value is .93 and Question items for this scale were 12. Information acquiring scale reliability value is .804 and number of items for measuring the political information acquiring was 3. In the same way, Internal political efficacy Cronbach's Alpha value .843 and number of items was used to measure Internal political efficacy were 8. External political efficacy scale's Cronbach's Alpha value .703 and 6 items scale was used to measure external political efficacy. Similarly, scale of online political participation reliability is .941 and number of items were. 8 and offline political participation Cronbach's Alpha value .917 and 7 items scale was used to measure the offline political participation of the respondents.

Table 6
Pearson Correlations Test

		SM_USE
IESM	Pearson Correlation	.469**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

The above table reveals a moderately positive and significant relationship between social media use and Incidental Exposure to political information on social media ($r = .469$, p value = 0.00 < 0.01). As a result, the study's hypothesis is accepted that 'There is a positive correlation between use of social media and Incidental Exposure to political content on social media'. According to results it may claim that respondents expediently expose different political content on social networking platforms while they don't use media for political purposes. They may expose different political contents incidentally such as videos, pictures or text related to politics.

Table 7
Pearson Correlations Test

		IESM	INF_Q
INF_AQ	Pearson Correlation	.661**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In order to examine the study's second hypothesis (H1), 'there is a positive correlation between Incidental Exposure to political content on social media and Political Information Acquiring' The Pearson correlation test was used to determine the relationship. The results suggest that there is a moderately significant positive association ($r = .661$ p value = 0.00 < 0.01) between use of social media and incidental exposure on social media political contents. It may be claim that respondent who do not

use media for political purpose may end up with getting political information through Facebook, twitter, YouTube or Instagram.

Table 8
Pearson Correlations Test

		INFO_AQ
OPP	Pearson Correlation	.615**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
OFPP	Pearson Correlation	.560**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

In above table Pearson correlation test was applied and results showed that There is a strong positive and significant correlation ($r = .615$ p value= $0.00 < 0.01$) between Information Acquiring through incidental exposure to social media political contents and online Political Participation. These findings support the notion that respondents participate in online political activities after incidental exposure to political contents such as videos, pictures or text and they also perform different type of online political activities

The table 4.8 depicts the values of Pearson correlation ($r = .515$ p value= $0.00 < 0.01$) test between Information Acquiring through incidental exposure to social media political contents and Offline Political Participation which revealed that there is positive and significant association between Information Acquiring through incidental exposure to social media political contents and Offline Political Participation. These results shows that respondents perform different political activities after exposing to different political contents on social networking sites incidentally.

Discussions

The purpose of this study was to provide evidence that people who use media for nonpolitical purposes in Pakistan may or may not acquire political information and whether they participate in political activities after incidentally exposing to political contents. The findings of the study reveal that people use different media platforms but most of the people use social media platform. People mostly use YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. People use these social media platforms for different purposes such as entertainment, information, education or connecting with their friends and family but they prefer to use Facebook and YouTube in order fulfill their desire purpose.

In term of first objective, finding of the study revealed that Incidental exposure on social media leads to political information acquiring. These result shows that people who use different social media platform for other than political purpose may also expose and consume different political contents such as news, satirical or infotainment contents on these plat forms. These results strengthened the concept of O-S-O-R which described that exposure to the political contents foster information seeking (Chan, 2016; Cho, Shah, McLeod, McLeod, Scholl, & Gotlieb. 2009). Moreover, People may easily follow hyperlinks or open a new browser tab and use self-directed search queries to locate more information on social media, allowing a dynamic shift from unintentional exposure to more active and guided information searches. These findings are in line with the findings of Fletcher and Nielsen, (2017) and Oeldorf-Hirsch, (2018) they explored that incidental exposure leads to information acquiring.

In term of last objective, results of the study revealed that Incidental exposure to social media political contents leads people to participate in online and offline political activities. results strengthened the concept of O-S-O-R which described that interpersonal exchange about politics and political discussions suggested to participate

in political activity like, online political participation. These findings provide support Ekström et al. (2014) which explored that use of social networking sites and political participation are positively correlated. Similarly, Shah et al (2007) explored that political influence on civic and political participation. According to previous research, the use of social media for political engagement has expanded dramatically over the world, particularly among young adults (Ton, et al, 2016; Skoric & Poor, 2013). Furthermore, these findings contradict the previous studies (Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2013).

Conclusion

In conclusion, social networking platforms play an essential role in the political process because they involve users who do not utilize social media for political purposes but end up learning about politics and participating in politics. The study revealed that accidental exposure to political content on sites such as Facebook and YouTube can result in the acquisition of political information. So, even if you're simply scrolling through your feed or watching random videos, you may come across political posts or discussions that engage your interest. So, just by stumbling upon political content, you might find yourself joining political discussions, sharing your opinions, or even participating in protests or campaigns. Social media has the power to influence political participation and provide a platform for young individuals to voice their opinions and contribute to the political landscape. Though, this research provided evidence that incidental exposure on social networking platforms played an important role in political information acquiring and participation yet there are some limitations. The first limitation of this research is, the data was collected through purposive sampling technique. As a result, because individuals of a population do not have an equal probability of being included in a sample, this form of sample does not necessarily reflect a population. Secondly, this study focused on four social networking platforms but there are other social media platforms that people can use to fulfil their purpose. Lastly, there are some other variables which may affect the political participation such as socio-economic factors. Therefore, further researches could be done to fulfil the above-mentioned gap of the study.

Recommendations

Policymakers and political parties should recognize the potential of social media as a tool for political awareness and participation. These social media tools can play the role of catalysts for political engagement in Pakistan. Moreover, results show social media tools are providing the new way of disseminating the political information to the potential public in a more specific way especially, in Pakistan where young voters comprising a substantial part of the electorate. Further research should be conducted to understand the long-term effects of social media on political participation through these social media tools. This will help policymakers, researchers, and social media platforms to continuously adapt and improve their strategies for fostering meaningful political participation. So it can be created more informed, engaged, and inclusive political landscape.

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