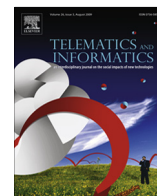




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Social media use, political affect, and participation among university students in urban China

Chen Gan ^{a,*}, Francis L.F. Lee ^a, Ying Li ^b

^a School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong

^b School of Communication, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

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ABSTRACT

Although the role of affects and emotions in political participation has attracted much scholarly attention, few studies have examined whether and how media and communications can be the sources of political affects. This study argues that social media are not only information channels; they can also be effective in communicating feelings and emotions. Social media use may contribute to political affects, which in turn impinge on civic and political participation. In addition, political affects may moderate the effects of social media use on political participation. Based on a survey of university students in Guangzhou, China (N = 897), this study finds that, under China's networked authoritarianism, political communication via social media is related to positive affects toward the government and society, while connection with activists via social media is related to negative affect. Positive and negative affects have different impact on different types of participation. Negative affects strengthen the connection between social media use and participation. The roles of three discrete negative emotions – anger, anxiety and fear – are also explored.

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1. Introduction

In the past two decades, political scientists and media researchers have reconsidered the “rational bias” in previous studies on public opinion and political participation (Groenendyk, 2011). Scholars have recognized that political affect plays an important role in the political process since it has strong motivational capability and can influence individuals' cognition (Brosch, 2013), information processing (Lodge and Taber, 2005), and attitude formation (e.g., Cassino and Lodge, 2007).

Given its impact on attitudes and behavior, how political affect arises should be an important question. However, while existing studies mostly follow the basic definition of emotions as the result of individuals' evaluations of the relationship between themselves and their environment, questions such as what factors influence the evaluation process, what information people use to make the evaluations, and whether media and communications play a role in triggering political affect have yet to be adequately explored (Groenendyk, 2011).

This study aims at helping to fill the research gap by proposing that social media use might be a source of political affect. Many researchers have noted that social media constitute an effective “information system” providing users with large amount of information (Chen et al., 2015). This article contends that social media can also be an effective “emotion system” particularly conducive for the expression and transmission of emotions. Political affects are likely to arise as information and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ganchen0111@163.com (C. Gan), francis_lee@cuhk.edu.hk (F.L.F. Lee), liyong416@szu.edu.cn (Y. Li).

emotions diffuse through online networks, and such affects may mediate part of the influence of social media use on political participation.

Nonetheless, the exact relationship between social media and political affect needs to be understood within contexts. This study focuses on university students in urban China, where the rise of digital media has provided the platforms for public discussions and online activism on the one hand (Yang, 2009a), and the authoritarian state has set up a sophisticated system of Internet control on the other (Creemers, 2015). As we will explicate, under the context of networked authoritarianism (MacKinnon, 2012), different dimensions of social media use may be associated with different types of political affects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotions and political participation

To explain individuals' political engagement, political scientists have conventionally focused on relatively stable predispositions and resources, such as partisanship, political ideologies, interests, efficacy, and knowledge (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Richards, 2004). However, many political phenomena cannot be explained if actors were assumed to be totally rational. Examples include why people vote even though one's vote is extremely unlikely to alter the outcome (Groenendyk, 2011), why people are willing to engage in high-risk political actions (Aminzade and McAdam, 2002), and why many people participate in politics only sometimes (Valentino et al., 2011). On these issues, political affect may constitute the key.

Studies on political affect can be generally differentiated into those focusing on positive vs. negative emotions and those examining discrete emotions such as anger, fear, and enthusiasm. The former type of studies may measure multiple positive and negative emotions, but the emotions were often found to be loaded on just two factors representing negative and positive emotions respectively (Abelson et al., 1982; Marcus, 1988). They then focus on contrasting the impact of positive and negative emotions.

Specifically, according to affective intelligence theory (AIT) (Marcus et al., 2000), the valence of emotions invokes either the dispositional or surveillance system. The positive emotion of enthusiasm results when one was situated in a familiar and rewarding context. Existing attitudes and behaviors would be reinforced. In contrast, situations of uncertainties or danger could arouse the negative emotion of anxiety, which interrupts a person's reliance on habits and routines. Negative affect urges people to collect and process information more systematically. People experiencing positive emotions tend to take routine actions and/or engage in reward-seeking behavior. Negative emotions can disrupt routine participation, but it can also encourage danger-avoidance behavior or strategic actions to deal with the threats (Gray, 1990; Marcus et al., 2000).

While AIT tends to reduce various emotions into the positive affect of enthusiasm and negative affect of anxiety, cognitive appraisal (CA) theory sees emotions as discrete responses generated and sustained by conscious appraisals of the situations (Brosch, 2013). Discrete negative emotions can be associated with different appraisals of the causes of the threat and the possibility of controlling it, which in turn influence people's behavior (Roseman, 1996). For instance, anger arises when a threat could be attributed to a cause and is regarded as controllable (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Anger inhibits deliberation and promotes participation (Valentino et al., 2009, 2011). Anxiety or fear, in contrast, was triggered when an individual lacks a sense of control and fails to attribute a cause to the threat (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). It triggers deliberation and risk avoidance, thus suppresses participation (Huddy et al., 2007) or leads to a focus on low-cost, expressive actions (Valentino et al., 2011).

It should be noted that the valence perspective and discrete emotions perspective are not incompatible. As there are similarities and correlations among emotions of a certain valence, a focus on positive vs. negative emotions would be appropriate for certain purposes. For reasons to be stated below, this study sets up hypotheses mainly for positive vs. negative emotions. The analysis of discrete emotions would be supplementary and exploratory.

2.2. Social media and political affect

Previous studies on the role of social media on political participation have suggested that it can serve as a political information hub, triggering information sharing, learning, discussion, community building, and online mobilization (Chen et al., 2015). The possibility that social media can contribute to the sharing of emotions was highlighted by some scholars, such as Castells (2015), but it has hitherto received little direct empirical examination.

This article contends that social media can be an important source of political affect due to how it facilitates the expression and communication of emotions. Several considerations are central to this argument. First, social media platforms allow emotions to be expressed not only through conventional means such as discourses, music, and cartoon, but also through additional means such as emoticons and flashers (Yang, 2009b). Emoticons, for instance, are found to be able to enhance social exchange and even assist in the expression of intimacy (Wall et al., 2016).

Second, the "virtuality" of online communication – i.e., "something disembodied, without external form or physicality emerged somewhat later" (Gilmore and Warren, 2007, p. 582–583) – was found to carry the potential for greater emotional expression (Gilmore and Warren, 2007; Sieben, 2007). People could be less embarrassed to disclose their emotional states in

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