**Effect of Social Media on Public Opinion**

According to McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, (2014), public opinion can be considered as the collection of thoughts and views of most of the social group. Social media, unlike the mainstream media, allow all the users to participate in the creation and sharing of content through social networking. The social media include but not limited to Facebook, Twitter and opinion blogs that utilize internet technology. There is a wide range of literature on the effect of social media on public opinion. Some research shows that it has a different impact on public opinion which depends on public factors like age and its use. From a different perspective, social media is viewed to affect public opinion either positively or negatively (Price, 2008). This has influenced the approval or disapproval of its application by various organizations based on their operating principles. Following the popularity of social media, it is now central to the communication process, and its impact on public opinion is significant. A research study by Gorodnichenko, Pham and O Talavera (2018) using Twitter data for the Brexit referendum and 2016 US presidential election finds that bots are shaping the public opinion and voting outcomes. Another dimension is that the social media especially twitter conversations have been found inconsistent such that at times they are more liberal than the survey responses while at other times they are more conservative (McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2014). A research study by Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Gil de Zúñiga, (2017) show that opinion leaders in their social networks directly or indirectly change others political attitudes and behaviors.

**Literature Review**

**Social Media and Political Persuasion**

There is an extensive body of literature that shows social media is shaping individuals’ political opinions. The public exposure to dissenting political views in the social media leads to a change of one political opinion (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, (2016; Weeks et al., 2017). Social media users have a strong dedication to build and maintain friend networks which influence individual political opinion. The use of news has been found central to political persuasion. The basis for a political opinion can be defined on the tendency to be persuaded. In other words, the literature shows that most people don't form political ideas that are independent of the world around them (Enikolopov, Petrova, & Zhuravskaya, 2011). This research study concludes that media (both social and mainstream) influence the political outcomes. The conclusion is significant in that access to independent TV channel increased the probability of voting to the opposition parties. The research defines that social media increases this level of independence in political opinions. Social media give great opportunities to discuss politics even though their main reasons for prevalence are to socialize.

Other bodies of literature show that social media promotes political persuasion using fake news. The study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) indicates that in social media platforms like Facebook content is relayed to the public without fact-checking or third-party filtering. In this case, an individual author with no credibility and reputations can share fake news influencing the political opinions of the public in the broader scope. Most of the researchers cite the US 2016 presidential election to have thrived on false stories. Silverman, Craig (2016) showed that the fake news succeeding in the social media tended to favor Trump over Clinton. Commentators and researchers conclude that were it not by the influence of the fake news Donald Trump would not have been elected as the US president. The literature includes the potential steps that could be taken to reduce the negative impact of fake news on social media on political persuasion.

Other previous research had suggested that the source of the news would determine the level of persuasion. The research study by English, Sweetser, and Ancu, (2011) concludes that social media users pay attention to the message source. Considering that for this particular study the study population focused on those who used Youtube as a source of political information it contradicts the outcomes of results obtained from Facebook and Twitter messages. In other words, there is a need for sufficient literature that distinguishes the impact of each particular media platforms towards political persuasion. The research by Gorodnichenko et al., (2018) shows Twitter messages to have played a significant role in influencing the election of Donald Trump. There is a need to focus research on the most vulnerable social media platforms in which users fail to assess the credibility of information source before making a political judgment.

**Social Media and Public Disagreements**

There is a vast body of literature that shows social media has established a high level of disagreements on the core agendas. In other words, with social media, the aspect of the public opinion is in a confused state. People engage in debates and disagreements they would not otherwise be involved if they were using other platforms. According to the research study by Barnidge, (2015), social media can be positively related too political disagreements. The heavy social media users who are exposed to extensive information are in higher risks of a political disagreement than the light users. The political disagreements have negative impacts on the social relationships between users. The researches study Lee et al., (2014) shows that the use of social media has resulted in a high level of polarization of public opinion. In other words, since individuals are more likely to be exposed to the likeminded view and avoid the different perspectives, they form extreme opinions in the direction of the original opinion of the subject. Social media users’ desires to remain accepted within the virtual social groups are thus likely to express only the accepted views. On the political affiliation, social media users will engage in disagreements that depicts them as part of the winning social group.

There is enough literature that compares disagreements on social media platforms to face-face settings. According to Barnidge, (2017) the social media users perceive more political arguments than the non-users. This disagreement is viewed by social media more than in other settings. For the social media disagreements, the explorations are beyond the local context. There are social norms in the face-face relationships that discourage disagreements. For other anonymous settings like the message boards and community forums, individuals tend to visit only the like-minded discussions. This depicts that political disagreements are subjects of social media more than in other forums.

From a different view, other literature suggests that social prevents exposure to political disagreements. Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, (2017) identify common arguments that social media users have a unique way of avoiding political discussions which are uncommon to the non-users. The mechanisms of avoiding disagreements suggested in the research include algorithmic filtration or the particular affiliation. However, in conclusions, the research findings show that social media users are in exposure to more disagreements than the non-users unrelated to the affiliations. In other words, social media do not prevent exposure to political disagreements. The existing body of literature, however, has limitations on whether social media equally promotes resolutions to the arguments. There is a need to build the body of research to include if social media helps neutralization of the emerging disagreements.

**Social Media and the Level of Public Participation**

There is an increased body of literature that shows social media encourage participatory political behaviors. In other words, there is a positive contribution from social media in engaging the public to give their political views. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, (2012) suggest increased participation in public agenda, increased knowledge. The question, however, remains unsolved, and other literature indicates that social media deepen political and civic engagement. The social media platforms can be used to pull public participation in the agendas. According to Holt et al., (2013) the political involvement as a result of media differs across various age groups. The study concludes that social media use among young adults promotes civic participation. The population is in high use of social media and hence converge their participation into a broader scope of views. Continuous and increased involvement in the use of social media there will be an overall increase in the level of political interests in the future.

In overall, the research findings are thus that the change in political participation is highly dependent on the population involved. Kushin and Yamamoto, (2010) find that the use of online media by college students during the 2008 elections significantly influenced political participation. For this particular area of research, literature has not included increased use of social media across all ages. While the 2008 election could have captured the use of social media for political reasons among the youth, there is a need to evaluate the participation across all ages.

**Conclusion**

The existing literature on social media effects on public opinion shows both positive and negative effects. One of the areas is increased persuasion of individuals on their political views. Since literature indicates there is no independence in political opinions, social media promotes changing the views to fit on the various social groups. Social media equally influence the public towards political disagreements. While people can shy off from the political disagreements in the face to face platforms, they are more likely to participate in the differences in the social media platforms. Another effect of social media is increased participation in political agendas especially politics among the youth. The current literature, however, is limited in knowledge on the impact of increased use in social media across all ages to the subject of public opinion. Will the public opinion be polarized, or will it be more divergent?

References

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of economic perspectives*, *31*(2), 211-36.

Barnidge, M. (2015). The role of news in promoting political disagreement on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *52*, 211-218.

Barnidge, M. (2017). Exposure to political disagreement in social media versus face-to-face and anonymous online settings. *Political Communication*, *34*(2), 302-321.

Diehl, T., Weeks, B. E., & Gil de Zuniga, H. (2016). Political persuasion on social media: Tracing direct and indirect effects of news use and social interaction. *new media & society*, *18*(9), 1875-1895.

English, K., Sweetser, K. D., & Ancu, M. (2011). YouTube-ification of political talk: An examination of persuasion appeals in viral video. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *55*(6), 733-748.

Enikolopov, R., Petrova, M., & Zhuravskaya, E. (2011). Media and political persuasion: Evidence from Russia. *American Economic Review*, *101*(7), 3253-85.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, *17*(3), 319-336.

Gorodnichenko, Y, T Pham and O Talavera (2018), “[Social media, sentiment and public opinions: Evidence from #Brexit and #USElection](http://www.nber.org/papers/w24631)," NBER working paper 24631.

Holt, K., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J., & Ljungberg, E. (2013). Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as leveller?. *European Journal of Communication*, *28*(1), 19-34.

Kushin, M. J., & Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did social media really matter? College students' use of online media and political decision making in the 2008 election. *Mass Communication and Society*, *13*(5), 608-630.

Lee, J. K., Choi, J., Kim, C., & Kim, Y. (2014). Social media, network heterogeneity, and opinion polarization. *Journal of communication*, *64*(4), 702-722.

McKinney, M. S., Houston, J. B., & Hawthorne, J. (2014). Social watching a 2012 Republican presidential primary debate. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *58*(4), 556-573.

PCE (n.d.). Impact of Social Media. Retrieved from <https://www.publicconsultationcanada.com/resources-and-ideas/impact-social-media/>

Price, V. (2008). Social identification and public opinion: Effects of communicating group conflict. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *53*(2), 197-224.

Silverman, Craig. (2016). “This Analysis Shows How Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook.” BuzzFeed News, November 16.

Stempel, G H, T Hargrove and J P Bernt (2000), “Relation of growth of use of the Internet to changes in media use from 1995 to 1999”, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 77(1): 71-79.

Weeks, B. E., Ardèvol-Abreu, A., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2017). Online influence? Social media use, opinion leadership, and political persuasion. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *29*(2), 214-239.

Yang, J., Barnidge, M., & Rojas, H. (2017). The politics of “Unfriending”: User filtration in response to political disagreement on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *70*, 22-29.