The Association between College Students` Participation Behavior and Social Media Use

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How to cite
Kilinc, E., Tarman, B., & Yussupova, S. (2023). The Association between college students` participation behavior and social media use. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, *8*(2), 56-67 https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2023.11

ABSTRACT

This paper examines college students` participation behaviors and the use of social media tools. The descriptive survey model was applied to investigate university students` participation behaviors. The data was collected through a "Participation Questionnaire" from 284 college students in Kazakhstan. The result showed that students who spend less time on social media are positively related to participatory citizenship. Moreover, students with fewer social media accounts are more likely to engage in political, volunteer, and social events than students with more social media accounts.

KEYWORDS

Participation, social media, citizenship, college

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging individuals to participate in the decision-making process is one of the main components of democracy. Participation is not limited to involving politics and voting. Indeed, it is also related to promoting voluntary activities and supporting organizations that provide checks on administrations. Participatory democracy holds authorities accountable and promotes the public good (Crane et al. 2004; Karatzimas, 2020). A participatory citizen is one who "actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national level," according to Westheimer and Kahne (2004, p. 5). Many Western countries included democracy and human rights in the school curricula to prepare new generations for their role in democratic societies.

According to several researchers, colleges, and universities must give students the information and abilities necessary for success in democratic societies (Doganay et al., 2007; Kilinc & Korkmaz, 2015; Pasek et al., 2008); and should inspire students to be aware of their social and professional responsibilities, communicate with others, act creatively and cooperatively, and assume ownership of problem-solving.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Civic Participation and Social Media

The health and stability of democracy are greatly influenced by the characteristics and attitudes of citizens. This includes "the desire to participate in the political process to advance common interests and hold political authorities to account" (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994, p. 352, 353). Citizens are the most important set of stakeholders (Karatzimas, 2020), so fostering civic engagement and democratic citizenship through education is crucial. It entails the process of showing concern, accepting responsibility, and taking action to resolve social issues. (Ostrander, 2004; Tarman & Kilinc, 2022).

The term "civic participation" describes individuals' specific actions to sway group decision-making and problem-solving procedures (Nah et al., 2016). Individuals are offered a wide range of participation activities such as voting, being a community board member, participating in volunteering activities, etc. These participations can be classified into two groups: Community participation and political participation (Lee et al. 2019). Community participation refers to citizen involvement in a local issue, such as fundraising activities, volunteering, and organizing local groups. Political participation, on the other hand, is a more formal process than civic participation and refers to being a member of a political party, voting, protesting, and petitioning (Colby et al. 2007; Lee et al., 2010). In the existing literature, both types of participation have been discussed to increase the accountability of local/national government, increase its effectiveness, and strengthen democracy (Rebori, 2007). In addition, promoting civic participation at the college level fosters the practices of democracy and education (Palmer & Standerfer, 2004). The spread and activation of civic participation also

reflect the democratization process of society, as it will create an identity between the political and civil society (Cavdar, 2004; Doganay, Cuhadar, & Sari, 2007).

Participatory democracy, which includes the right to participate in the state administration, has received the support of an important part of democracy theorists and has become one of the most frequently, mentioned issues in democracy discussions (Cuhadar, 2006). Three conceptions of a "good citizen"; personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented are examined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). They defined a participatory citizen as "one who actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state and national level" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 5). Participation in civic affairs at the local, national, and global levels is affected by several factors. Nowadays, social media has the power to fundamentally alter how people interact with one another and with society. Therefore, we still need to understand how social media affect civic participation.

In this research, the authors applied Teorell et al.`s (2007) theory of participation. According to Teorell et al.`s (2007), participation consisted of five main elements; voting, political activities, consumer participation, protesting, and communicating with politicians. Voting is defined as the practice of choosing officials. Party activities include but are not limited to being a member of a party, attending its events, volunteering for the party, and making financial contributions to support the party. Consumer participation includes buying specific products, boycotting others, and making donations to support or oppose a cause. Like party activities, protests are aimed at unofficial groups like the media or the public at large. Finally contacting politicians aims to influence and make changes in society. Using this framework, the authors were able to determine the connection between college students' involvement in social media and their use of it.

Social media is an inevitable part of many people`s daily life. According to research, ¾ of Americans use social media and check their accounts daily (Perrin and Anderson, 2018). Similarly, social media is widely used by Kazakhs. In Kazakhstan, 13.80 million people used social media in January 2022, which represents 72.3 percent of the total population (Datareportal, 2023). About 99% of Kazakhstan's youth regularly use social media and the internet (Sairambay, 2022b). Over the past decades, scholars have discussed how social media facilitates social mobilization. Indeed, social media provides individuals and organizations a platform to interact with their followers and the broader public (Forde, 2017; Stein, 2009), decreases the cost of coordination, makes it easier to carry out transnational actions, and broadens the range of possible actions that social movements can do (Lee & Chan, 2016).

Several studies examined how digital media is affecting citizens' civic participation (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Bond et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2018; Heiss et al., 2019; Kilinc & Tarman, 2022). There are different views on how social media affects individuals` participation behaviors. Some scholars maintain that individuals who have a higher choice of media and spend more time on social media are more likely to participate (Boulianne, 2018; Dimitrova et

al., 2014; Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Strömbäck et al., 2017). Others, on the other hand, claim that using social media hardly encourages people to participate.

The optimistic view states that the wide usage of social media brings an opportunity to increase democratic participation among young generations. Indeed, individuals can reach information from diverse perspectives, articulate opinions, and engage with politicians through social media (Bond et al., 2012; Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Weeks et al., 2017). Ellison and Vitak (2015) proposed that individuals can share their political views, ask/reply to politicians' posts, and engage in other activities. When college students are using their social media, they probably are exposed to some events or activities that invite them to participate in both non-political and political activities. Through social media, they also can learn how to engage in these activities in person or online beyond their physical environment (Kim & Ellison, 2021). The pessimistic view maintains that social media hardly foster participation (Heiss et al., 2019). According to Theocharis and Lowe (2016), social media use causes a significant drop in reported civic and political involvement.

While some studies suggested that social media, particularly among college students, has a positive effect on civic involvement (Moeller, Kühne, & De Vreese 2018; Heiss and Matthes, 2019), some nations restrict or manipulate access to the internet and social media. Several researchers postulated that Kazakhstan intended to manipulate and/or control social media (Anceschi, 2015; Kosnazarov, 2019). Indeed, in 2018, Kazakhstan spent $4.3 million on an automated surveillance program to track signs of political turmoil on social media (Sairambay 2022a). Since college students in Kazakhstan use social media more than any other politically engaged age group, it is critical to comprehend how college students in Kazakhstan use social media for civic engagement because they are the ones who drive political events, especially when calling for political change (Sairambay, 2022a)

The main aim of this paper is to examine university students` participation behaviors and using social media platforms. The descriptive survey model was applied to investigate university students` participation behaviors. The data was collected through a "Participation Questionnaire" from 286 college students in Kazakhstan. Toward these aims, the authors investigate the following research questions:

1. Is there any statistically significant difference in participation behaviors between college students based on the number of their social media accounts?

2. Is there any statistically significant difference in participation behaviors between college students based on their social media usage time?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The authors used a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine university students` participation behaviors and their use of social media tools. Through descriptive survey design, researchers can assess opinions, attitudes, practices, demographics, and preferences (Gay,

Mills, & Airisian, 2006;). Especially for educational research, survey design is one of the prominent methods for data collection (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Participants

The data was collected from 309 college students in Kazakhstan in the 2021-2022 education year. Some students did not complete the questionnaire. After eliminating these empty questionnaires, we have 284 completed questionnaires. Table 1 provides detailed information about the participants. Our sample was dominated by female students, 40% of the students have social media accounts and 60% of them have more than three social media accounts. In addition, 72% of the participants spend more than 3 hours per day using their social media accounts.

Table 1. *College Students` Profile*

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	209	72.8
Male	77	27.2
Total	284	100
Social Media Account (SM)		
1-2	116	40.4
3-4	152	53.0
5+	19	6.6
Time Spent in SM		
Less than 1 hour	11	3.8
1-2 hours	66	23
3-4 hours	134	46.7
More than 5 hours	74	25.8

Instrument

The authors used the "Participation Questionnaire" developed by Cuhadar (2006) to collect data from college students in Kazakhstan. The questionnaire consists of 10 items there are possible answers for each one based on a 5-point Likert scale (never = 1, rare = 2, sometimes = 3, usually = 4, and always = 5). There are so scale reverse-scored items. The lowest and maximum scores are 10 and 50 respectively. A higher overall score indicates higher participation among the participants.

Analysis of Data

The SPSS 20.0 statistical package program was used by the authors to perform descriptive analysis and one-way ANOVA. The significance test between groups was conducted using α = 0.05 significance level.

FINDINGS

The authors used Participation Questionnaire to evaluate college students` participation behaviors. In our study, participation includes both political and civic participation. Table 2 presents the participants` responses for each item in the Questionnaire.

The result showed that college students show lower political participation. Indeed, the item "Writing on the walls for protest or propaganda" has the lowest mean (M=1.23); and "Writing an email/tweet of criticism to government officials for an application that is disliked" (M=1.51); "Conveying personal thoughts about the news in the newspaper or the comments of the columnists via email and/or social media" (M=1.74). On the other hand, students have quite a higher mean than political participation items. For instance, the "Voluntarily helping others outside of organized campaigns" item has the highest mean (M=2.99); "Buying a product for an environmental and ethical reason" has (M=2.86); and "Protesting buying a product for an environmental and ethical reason" has (M=2.70). According to this research, college students generally show low both civic and political participation behaviors.

Table 2. *College Students` Responses to Each Item*

Items	M	SD
1. Working for a non-governmental organization or organization	1.76	1.13
2. Signing the petition	2.57	1.26
3. Taking part in legal demonstrations	1.77	1.10
4. Protesting buying a product for environmental and ethical reasons	2.70	1.15
5. Buying a product for environmental and ethical reasons	2.86	1.21
6. Being in close contact with politicians	1.81	0.99
7. Voluntarily helping others outside of organized campaigns	2.99	1.17
8. Conveying personal thoughts about the newspaper news or columnists' comments via email and/or social media.	1.74	1.12
9. Writing on the walls for protest or propaganda	1.23	0.71
10. Writing an email/tweet of criticism to government officials for an application that is disliked	1.51	.84

The Number of Social Media Accounts and Participation Behaviors

The authors conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine whether students` participation behaviors differed by the number of social media accounts that participants actively use. Based on the one-way ANOVA`s findings, a significant difference was found in the number of social media accounts to students` participation behaviors $F(2,274) = 3.042$, $p = 0.04$.

Students having more than 5 social media accounts (M_{5+}=24.33, SD=5.75) show more participation behaviors than college students with fewer social media accounts (M_{1-2}=20.58, SD=5.31 and M_{3-4}=20.78, SD=6.86). A follow-up test was conducted by the authors to assess pairwise mean differences. The Scheffe tests showed that there was no difference between

students having 1-2 social media accounts and students having 3-4 social media accounts; on the other hand, these categories differed significantly from those who use more than five social media accounts.

Table 3. *One-Way Analysis of Variance of Participation Behaviors by the Number of Social Media Accounts*

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	2	190.052	95.026	3.042	.04
Within groups	274	8557.912	31.233		
Total	276	8747.964			

Spending Time on the Social Media and Participation Behaviors

The authors conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine whether students` participation behaviors differed by their social media hours. Based on the one-way ANOVA`s findings, a significant difference was found in the number of social media accounts to students` participation behaviors $F(3,274) = 2.994$, $p = 0.03$.

Students who spend less than an hour on social media accounts ($M_{less1}=25.45$, SD=11.05) show more participation behaviors than other students who spend more hours on social media ($M_{1-2}=20.92$, SD=5.11, $M_{3-4}=20.35$, SD=5.03, and $M_{5+}=21.30$, SD=5.80). A follow-up test was conducted by the authors to assess pairwise mean differences. The Scheffe tests showed that there was no difference between students spending 1-2 hours and students spending 3-4 and more hours on social media; however, these groups had a significant difference with those who spend less than an hour on their social media accounts.

Table 4. *One-Way Analysis of Variance of Participation Behaviors by the Spending Hours on Social Media Accounts*

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between groups	3	279.799	93.266	2.994	0.31
Within groups	274	8536.460	31.155		
Total	277	8816.259			

DISCUSSION

During the last decade, many researchers and educators have considered the effects of social media on young generations' participation behaviors. Many of them expressed a positive impact that social media usage will foster democratic participation, especially among younger generations (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Heiss and Matthes, 2019; Weeks et al., 2017)

Online activism, as Oser et al. (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013) noted, is a unique form of political involvement. Cantijoch (2012) indicated that the more frequent use of social media increases the likelihood of participating in political protest. Similarly, Enjolras et al. (2013) maintained that social media apply a solid and autonomous impact on political mobilization.

According to an experiment conducted by Bond and colleagues (Bond et al., 2012), the use of social media fosters information seeking, political self-expression, and voting. In addition, the use of social media is a robust predictor of civic behaviors (Kaufhold, Valenzuela & Gil de Zuniga , 2010). However, in this study, we found that students are less interested in political protest. Participants rarely shared their appreciation/criticism of government officials and taking part in legal demonstrations. On the other hand, they are likely to protest products or brands for environmental concerns.

Based on Teorell et al.`s (2007) theory, participation consisted of five main elements: voting, political activities, consumer participation, protesting, and communicating with politicians. Our research indicated that college students in Kazakhstan showed their support or protest mostly on the consumer participation dimension. On contrary, they showed low participation in political activities, protesting, and communicating with politicians.

In this study, the authors also found that having more than 5 social media accounts shows more participation behaviors than other students who have fewer social media accounts. Furthermore, students who spend less than an hour on social media accounts show more participation behaviors than other students who spend more hours on social media. These results are not surprising because Kazakhstan spent $4.3 million on an automated surveillance program to track signs of political turmoil on social media in 2018. (Sairambay, 2022a). MacKinnon (2011) defines these censorship and online surveillance as "networked authoritarianism". Anceschi (2015) postulated that some examples of networked authoritarianism might be observed on social media in Kazakhstan. This can explain why Kazakh college students` low level of participation. Similarly, Theocharis and Love (2016) found that social media negatively affect participation and postulated that social media doesn't seem to have a big impact on participation in classic activities like politics and civic life, and they may even make them less effective. Our findings are also similar to Park and Kaye (2020) who stated that participation may be negatively impacted by social media. They discovered that those who used social media more frequently had lower participation rates in a panel study, which involved answering questions about political issues. This result can be explained that participants use social media for recreational use and spend their time on social media to escape their everyday struggles by disconnecting themselves from politics or issues.

The results of this study are not surprising because Kazakhstan purchased a $4.3 million automated surveillance program to monitor indications of political unrest on social media, in 2018 (Sairambay, 2022a). MacKinnon (2011) defines these censorship and online surveillance as "networked authoritarianism". Anceschi (2015) postulated that some examples of networked authoritarianism might be observed on social media in Kazakhstan. This can explain why Kazakh college students` low level of participation.

CONCLUSION

The main implication of this research is that we need to be more careful when making assumptions about the direction of causality between social media use and participation. This

study highlights the need for longitudinal and experimental research that examines the connections between participation and digital media as well as the processes by which they interact.

This study has a few limitations: first, the number of participants is small, so we can't be sure of the general trends we found. Second, the sample would be selected via random sampling. Third, the nature of the survey research could be considered another limitation of this research. The veracity of the participants' comments is a constant source of concern. The researchers, therefore, considered that participants were being honest with their answers.

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