العنوان:	The Impact Facebook on the Political Engagement in Kuwait
المصدر:	مجلة العلوم الاجتماعية
الناشر:	جامعة الكويت - مجلس النشر العلمي
المؤلف الرئيسي:	Al Fadhli, Salah M.
مؤلفين آخرين:	Al Saleh, Yaser(C-Auth.)
المجلد/العدد:	مج 40, ع 4
محكمة:	نعم
التاريخ الميلادي:	2012
الصفحات:	11 - 24
رقم MD:	470379
نوع المحتوى:	بحوث ومقالات
قواعد المعلومات:	EduSearch
مواضيع:	الكويت ، مستخلصات الأبحاث ، مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي ، الفيس بوك ، طلاب الجامعات ، المشاركة السياسية
رابط:	http://search.mandumah.com/Record/470379

The Impact of Facebook on the
Political Engagement in Kuwait

Salah Al-Fadhli[*]
Yaser Al-Saleh[**]

Abstract: Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook
are one of the latest examples of communications technologies that
have been widely-adopted by students. As a social networking tool,
Facebook removes barriers of censorship and empowers citizens to
influence and monitor the work of policy-makers. By enabling
people to connect across long distances, new information and
communication technologies, including social media, have been
instrumental in the growth of political movements. This study
investigates the political impact of Facebook on the Kuwaiti
college students. The findings indicate positive relationship
between Facebook use by the students and the political engage-
ment in Kuwait. The findings imply that Facebook will turn to be a
powerful tool for political change.

Key words: Facebook, Social networking, Political impact,
Technology and online collaboration.

Introduction:

The Web sites that seem to have taken over the Internet in the recent
years are known as social networks. Since social networking is a relatively
new topic in the literature, a definition is needed. Boyd and Ellison (2007)
conceptualise SNSs as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1)
construct a public or a semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)
articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3)
view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within

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[*]   Department of Information System, College of Business Administration, Kuwait
      University, Kuwait.
[**] Medical records department, College of Mdical Science PAAET, Kuwait.

the system"... Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices.

The first web-based social network site (SixDegrees.com) was launched in 1997. This site allowed users to create profiles, list their friends and contribute messages to bulletin boards. At the height of its success, the site had 1 million fully registered members. MySpace has a similar story of mega growth. The site was launched in 2003 and was initially used by the music community and its fans as a networking mechanism. By mid-2006, the site had over 100 million members. Facebook has emerged as a competitor to MySpace. Unlike the other social networking sites, its origins are in academia rather than the commercial world, launched in early 2004. Facebook is an online social networking website that lets users interact with each other by sharing information about themselves via personal profiles. Users share their information by "friending" others and allowing them access to their profile. Facebook has more than 600 million active users. According tocomScore (2008), Facebook is the leading social networking site based on monthly unique visitors.

Lenhart (2009) found in the study on Adults and Social Network Websites that young adult internet users (18 to 24 years) are much more likely than their older counterparts to use, and be part of, an online social network. Seventy five percent of this age group has a profile on a SNSs. Amongst these, a great portion of the respondents claim to have engaged in politically- driven activities.

Although SNSs were intended to be social communications tools, the uses of the SNSs has been extended to several domains. The use of social network services in an enterprise context presents the potential of having a major impact on the world of business and work (Fraser and Dutta 2008). Social networks are beginning to be adopted by healthcare professionals as a means to manage institutional knowledge, disseminate peer to peer knowledge and to highlight individual physicians and institutions. The advantage of using a dedicated medical social networking site is that all the members are screened against the state licensing board list of practitioners.

SNSs have been used also for political purposes. According to McClurg (2003) these social interactions create "opportunities for individuals to gather information about politics that allows them to live beyond personal resource constraints, thereby supporting their political

activity". The substantial opportunities of collaboration available to Middle Eastern civilians through Facebook and Twitter make these social media tools exceptionally powerful, leading to the potential to cause political change (Ghannam, 2011). This was obvious in the dramatic impact that Twitter had on the Iranian uprising in the summer of 2009. Significant segment of Arab users employ Facebook & Twitter to advance political goals. Those users are concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the Arab region, and are chiefly Egyptians, Saudis, Iraqis, Kuwaitis and Yemenis. Arab Facebook members include well-known Arab human rights activists who use the site to mobilize Arab public opinion and encourage Arabs to intellectually criticize the performance and actions of their rulers and politicians.

In January 2011, Facebook and Twitter went from being simply engaging social diversion to become engines of political change that ended decades of Arab authoritarianism (Altman, 2011). Facebook and Twitter spur political change in Tunisian, Egypt Libya, and Syria (Anderson, 2011; Owais, 2011). In Tunisia, Twitter and Facebook brought demonstrators out. In Egypt social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter were used to announce and publicize the initial protests of 25 January 2011 (Goodman, 2011). In Libya and Syria, Facebook and Twitter plays essential role in organizing protests against the regime (Christensen, 2011).

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter-in spite of the severe restrictions imposed on their usage by the government-helped the protest to spread, and breaking news to be publicized. In Kuwait, Facebook and Twitter were used by enthused youth to organize episodes of protest centered on political and civil rights. Obviously, social networks are likely to play a vital role in encouraging democracy and change in other countries throughout the Middle East. SNSs enthusiast the possibility that the medium could lead to increased political engagement. Political engagement-defined as ones level of political knowledge, interest, and efficacy-has long been modeled as a predictor of political participation.

Definitions of political participation have progressively broadened over the past four decades. In broader view, political participation can be defined as taking part in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies (Parry et al, 1992). One of the foundational assumptions of democratic theory is that the public must be sufficiently informed about public matters in order to be capable of

participating in political affairs. Political Knowledge is a term that refers to the general knowledge people have concerning the nature of government, politics, current and world events, etc (Gibson and Caldeira 2009). Much of the research on political knowledge addresses a main question: What role does communication play in the creation and maintenance of an informed citizenry? Therefore, political participation and knowledge affect each other reciprocally (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Increases in one will lead to increases in the other.

Kuwait enjoys a high level of political participation. Kuwait holds generally free and fair parliamentary elections with near universal adult suffrage for citizens. Its parliament is the strongest in the Gulf and rates among the strongest in the Arab world. Democracy is an integral part of Kuwaiti political culture and identity (Herb, 2009). Youth plays an essential role in the political participation in Kuwait. There are many forms of this participation. Of these forms is the discussing of political issues in Diwaynyas (where men gather) and through SNS; the organizing of demonstrations, and participating in parliamentary elections campaigns.

The popularity of the social networking website Facebook in the Arab world is constantly increasing. All across the region, governments, NGOs, groups, and individuals are utilizing social platforms to impact their societies politically, culturally, and socially. Statistics released in May 2010 by the Dubai-based company "Spot On" show that 15 million Arabs are Facebook users[1]. As of January 2011, there have been more than15 million Facebook usersin the Arab region. The Arabic version of Facebook adds 1M new users each month. There are now moreFace-bookusers in the Arab world than newspaper readers. And it's not just the young signing up; in the United Arab Emirates, for example, almost70 percentof Facebook users are over 25 years of age.

Age has long been considered one of the key determinants of variation in political attitudes and behaviour (Dalton, 2006). Young people are much more likely to use social networking. In Egypt, 37% of the participants are aged between 18-29, compared to 8% for groups aged 30 and over. Table (1) shows the number of internet and Facebook users in Arab countries (http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm, 2010).

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(1) www.islamtoday.net, May 25,2010.

Table (1)
Internet & Facebook users in Arab countries

Country	Internet users	Facebook users	Facebook penetration rate
Bahrain	649,400	235,100	31.9%
Iraq	325,000	275,000	.9%
Jordan	1,741,000	1,061,000	16.6%
Lebanon	1,200,000	1,024,000	24.8%
Oman	1,236,000	172,500	5.8%
Qatar	436,000	412,000	49%
Saudi Arabic	9,800,000	2,575,700	10%
Syria	3,935,000	30,000	.1%
UAE	3,778,000	1,709,000	34.4%
Yemen	420,000	119, 840	.5%
Egypt	17,060,000	3,500,000	*26.4%
Kuwait	1,100,000	547,600	19.6

Concerning messaging applications, about 30-35 percent of Arab members use Facebook, for personal messages; while messages with religious content count for 25 percent, political messages for 20 percent, advertising messages for 10 percent, and other messages for 10 percent (Fuad, Wessam, 2010). The majority of political and religious- content messages were written in Arabic. Generally, Arab Facebook members use the site for social purposes. Around 60 percent of Arab members use Facebook for entertainment and fun. The remaining 40 percent of Arab users utilize the site socio-politically, engaging with issues related to politics and political reform in the Arab world (Fuad, Wessam, 2010).

Social media tools have continued to grow in popularity in Kuwait. According to theInternet World Stats (2011), there are 822,640 Facebook users in Kuwait as of June 30, 2011, which is almost 75% of Kuwaits population and about 5% of the total number of Facebook users in the Arab countries. According to Arab Social Media Report (2011), the number of active Twitter users in Kuwait reached 113, 428 accounting for 16.24% of all tweets in the Arab region (Arab Social Media, 2011).

Presently, there is little empirical investigation on the effectiveness of new media in the political communication context. Recently, researchers have begun to examine specific forms of "political use" of the Internet, an approach we find to be more indicative of the mechanisms through which new media engages society (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2008). What makes this study more important is that it is conducted in the context of an Arab culture. A thorough review of the literature indicates that very few studies of this kind have been conducted throughout the Arab world (Fuad, 2010; Ghannam, 2011; Goodman, 2011; Owais, 2011). This study seeks to contribute to a more accurate understanding of SNSs by examining their potential as new venues for political engagement in the Arab societies. This study endeavored to answer the question: Can SNSs help to foster political engagement among young people in Kuwait?

Methodology

This study is trying to explore the impact of Facebook on the political Knowledge and participation among youths in Kuwait. Political participation and political knowledge are critical components of general political engagement; therefore, we examine two primary hypotheses. We expect that the information sources that are provided for members to access and share would increase levels of political knowledge if fully exploited and informed. Facebook can fulill the informational needs of users, a key ingredient for strengthening weak ties and promoting collective action (Kenski and Stroud, 2006).

H1: Facebook membership leads to increased levels of political knowledge.

We specifically expect that SNSs participation will prompt political participation. By including different types of activities under the umbrella of participation, we recognize that the domain of politically- relevant activities is wide-ranging and differs from one country to another. Allowing members to express their opinion through posts, and engaging on many levels with group discussion and information sharing are examples of political activities that we predict will stimulate political empowerment offline. By contrast, the lack of personal interaction and without social risk may lead to lower quality information sharing and provision.

H2: Facebook membership leads to increased levels of political participation.

We used original survey data to test the two hypotheses regarding the

relationship between Facebook use and college students political engagement. We opted to focus on Facebook only because the two mediums were the most popular SNS. The survey method of research was used to collect data. This exploratory study employed a convenience sample. The survey allows us to gather data about Facebook usage among a relevant population. The sample for the study was drawn from a population of students at Kuwait University. The sample consisted of 297 students studying at Kuwait University. This sample was highly appropriate for the study as research indicates that university students are heavily reliant on the Web, thus making them an important sample population to examine for potential effects. The questionnaire was sent to the students by email. In advance of fieldwork, a pilot of 15 students was conducted to test that the questionnaire wording was understood by a range of different people.

The questionnaire consists of 30 questions and was disseminated in the first week of April 2011. The questionnaire is composed of three sections. The first one consists of demographic questions (Age, Sex, GPA, Major, etc). The second consists of questions related to the general usage of Facebook (Number of Friends, Usage Time,). The third section consists of questions that test the political knowledge and political participation of the participants. The questionnaire was sent to the students by email as an attachment file. In advance of fieldwork, a pilot of 15 students was conducted to test that the questionnaire wording was understood by a range of different people. The questionnaires were received back within the following two weeks.

Results and Findings

We constructed a survey that was administered to college undergraduates at Kuwait University. In total, 350 questionnaires were randomly distributed among Kuwait university students. Of the total sample, 297 responses were valid, where the remaining 53 were excluded due to incompetence or an illegitimate pattern of responses. The reliability of the instrument was calculated using Cronbachs alpha. The results of the pilot study (analyzed using Cronbachs alpha) indicated that the questions were reliable. The overall alpha core for the pilot data was 0.977, which indicated high reliability of the instrument.

The survey allows us to gather data about Facebook usage among a relevant population including for distinctly political usage. Among the

valid participants, there were 149 (50.3%) males and 148 (49.7%) females. The results show that 192 (73.3%) of the participants have Facebook accounts; while 26.7% do not have accounts. Thus, Facebook represents an ideal venue for communication among young adults. In terms of internet usage, 54.4% were found to use internet two hours or more daily. Regarding the time spent using Facebook daily, 42.2% were found to use Facebook for 30 minutes or more every day. To gauge the intensity of Facebook use, we resorted to a scale developed by Ellison, Steinield & Lampe (2007) to gauge user engagement in Facebook activities based on number of friends. For those who have Facebook accounts, 50.6% of them have more than 50 friends. See table 2 for details.

Table (2)
Descriptive Statistics for Scale of Intensity of Facebook Use

	%
How many total Facebook friends do you have?	
Less than 10	9.5
11-50	30.0
51-100	23.2
101 or More	37.4
On a typical day, how much time do you spend on Facebook?	
Less than 10 minutes	24.2
10-30 min	32.6
More than 30 min, up to 1 hr	28.4
More than 1 hr	14.7
How frequently do you follow political news through Facebook?	
Always	6.8
Often	14.2
Sometimes	34.7
Rarely	22.6
Never	21.6

Since Kuwaiti society is conservative, it imposes some restrictions on females behavior. These restrictions include the use of SNSs. This attribute has been shown to be significant in terms of the percentage of females having Facebook accounts, their number of friends, and the intensity of Facebook use. Table 3 presents the details of ANOVA test for Gender Significance. Male students were more likely to have a Facebook account than female students. Gender was found to be a significant factor for number of Facebook friends and Intensity of Facebook Use. Regarding the usage of Facebook in terms of gender, 84% of male students have Facebook accounts, compared to 63% of female students. There was no indication that gender has significance on political knowledge and political participation.

Table (3)
Gender Significance

	Male Mean	Female Mean	Significance
Have Facebook account	1.2	1.37	.003
No. of Friends	2.97	2.71	.001
Publish Political Opinions	3.95	4.09	.096
Participate in Dialogue	3.82	4.01	.068
Intensity of Facebook use	2.15	2.52	.029
Internet Use	3.03	3.05	.876

Political Knowledge and Political Participation

The results show that 73% of the participants follow political news through Facebook, but only 23.7% believe that political news published in Facebook are credible. Regarding political participation, the mean for publishing political opinions on Facebook was 3.92, where the mean for participating in political dialogue found to be 3.81.

The normality of the data distributions was analyzed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to determine whether the significance levels of the sample data for critical thinking test fit a normal distribution. The confidence level was set at 95%. According to our test results, the p-value of the two factors was greater than 0.05, which indicates that the distribution of data was normal.

In order to establish discriminant validity, Factor analysis was used to identify factors that significantly affect political engagement. Total variation explained by the factor analysis is 87.02% and 18.92% of the variation remained unexplained. The questions of the political knowledge factor explained 70.14% of the variation, where the political participation explained 16.88% of the variation. This finding emphasizes the importance of the questions in explaining the impact of Facebook on political engagement.

In order to test whether there was a relationship between using Facebook and political knowledge and participation, ANOVA test was used to test the significance of political knowledge and political participation. It was found that having a Facebook account, the number of friends, and the intensity of Facebook have significant impact on political knowledge of the participants. The number of friends has been a significant impact on political participation, while having a Facebook account and the intensity of Facebook use are found not significant factors. See table 4 for details.

Table (4)
Political Knowledge & Political Participation

	Mean Square	F	Significance
Political Knowledge			
Having Facebook account	.196	12.275	.005
No. of Friends	10.859	11.616	.004
Intensity of Facebook use	11.485	13.984	.015
Political Participation			
Having Facebook account	.196	12.275	.126
No. of Friends	1.171	2.354	.004
Intensity of Facebook use	8.269	9.118	.638

Discussion

With 73% of the participants having a Facebook account, it is obvious that Facebook is an important communication tool among young adults in Kuwait. Results show that 55% of the participants use Facebook to follow political news; this indicates that a major percentage

of young adults in Kuwait rely on Facebook for their political knowledge. With mean of 3.92 and for publishing political opinions on Facebook, and 3.81 for participating in political dialogue, Facebook seems to provide civilians and political activists in Kuwait with a powerful voice. In an attempt to express their political views, people turned to collaboration in order to create change in the political scene. This collaboration was achieved through shared political knowledge and participation. Using survey data collected, we predicted that there would be a positive relationship between intensity Facebook use and students political participation. Our results provide an indication that this positive association exists. It is clear from the survey findings that a large proportion of the young people in Kuwait are engaged in local politics.

The above findings suggest that using Facebook can be an effective mean to enhance political engagement. These findings support the hypothesis that using Facebook membership leads to increased levels of political knowledge and political participation.

Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring the role of Facebook in the process of political participation among Kuwaiti young adults. This study expands upon previous research into the political utility of social network sites (i.e., Gueorguieva, 2008; Williams and Gulati, 2007) by demonstrating that Facebook is an effective location for expressing political issues.

Results were based on a quantitative study on Kuwaiti Facebook experience of using Facebook. Using survey data collected, we predicted that there were positive relationships between the use of Facebook and young peoples political knowledge, but not political participation.

It is important to remember that this study is limited by the small number of cases examined. Additionally, while the sample is representative of the population from which it is taken, it is not necessarily representative of the wider population of potential Facebook users. However, while this study certainly has its limitations, the general findings are positive. Various types of Facebook behavior have clear and significant effects on several types of positive political participation.

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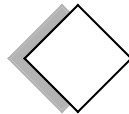
تأثير الفيس بوك على المشاركة السياسية في الكويت

صلاح الفضلي*
ياسر الصالح**

ملخص: تعد مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي – مثل الفيس بوك والتويتر – أحدث طرق التواصل بين الناس التي وفرتها التكنولوجيا الحديثة، وهي المواقع التي يمثل الطلاب أكثر مستخدميها. وكأحد مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي فإن الفيس بوك استطاع كسر حواجز الرقابة التي تفرضها الحكومات، وأعطى قوة إضافية للمواطنين في التأثير ومراقبة صناع القرار. ومن خلال تسهيل التواصل فيما بين الناس شجعت هذه المواقع على زيادة المشاركة السياسية للمواطنين. تبحث هذه الدراسة في تأثير استخدام الفيس بوك في المشاركة السياسية لطلاب الكليات والجامعات في الكويت. نتائج البحث تشير إلى وجود علاقة طردية بين استخدام الفيس بوك وزيادة المشاركة السياسية في الكويت.

المصطلحات الأساسية: مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، الفيس بوك، التأثير السياسي، التكنولوجيا والتواصل الاجتماعي.

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*   قسم نظم المعلومات، كلية العلوم الإدارية، جامعة الكويت، الكويت.
** قسم السجلات الطبية، كلية العلوم الطبية، الهيئة العامة للتعليم التطبيقي والتدريب، الكويت.