

FACTORS INFLUENCING FACEBOOK USERS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: INVESTIGATING THE CAMBODIAN CASE

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Abstract

As social networking sites (SNS) have been actively used as a platform for the political participation, this study investigates factors influencing SNS users' political participation intention and behavior in developing countries. More specifically, based on the integrated model of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) and Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM), we develop a research model on how technological factors (e.g., performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions) as well as social factors (e.g., political interests and experience) influence Facebook users' political participation intention, which lead to actual political participation behavior, focusing on the Cambodian context. Our research model will be empirically tested with survey samples gathered from Cambodian Facebook users and their actual political behaviors, measured by counting actual comments of each survey respondent one month after the survey. While prior studies have only focused on either technological or social influencing factors on online political participation, this paper is among the first attempts to investigate them from integrative and comparative perspectives. By highlighting the relative impacts of each factor in the context of developing countries, where direct and public challenging or criticizing on the government is still a fear for most citizens, this paper would provide an important lesson for other developing countries with a similar political environment.

Keywords: Political Participation, Online Political Discussion, Social Networking Site, Facebook, UTAUT, CVM, Developing Country, Cambodia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Currently, there are two escalating movements in Cambodian Internet users: (1) the exponentially increasing number of Internet and Social Network Sites (SNS) users and (2) the active involvement of SNS users (e.g., Facebook) in discussions on political issues. Geeks-in-Cambodia (2014) has reported that the amount of Cambodian Facebook users reached to 1,420,000 by June 4th, 2014. Interestingly, several political Facebook pages/groups (e.g., I Love Cambodia Hot News, Thy Sovantha, Mr Ear Kimsreng Political Express Version II, etc.) are also created and followed by tens of thousands of members. Thus, it seems to be a new trend that Cambodians (especially young people) are using their Facebook account as their platform to participate in politics and discuss about political issues these days (Greenwood 2013; Meyn 2013; Soeung 2013). So far, this phenomenon of younger generations' participation in discussion on political issues has not been common, opposing to the findings of Ha et al. (2013) and the report of United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2012), which state that older citizens are more likely involved in politics in general.

Facebook, one of the most popular SNS, has actively been used as a platform for the political participation (Earl & Kimport 2011). Therefore, so far numerous studies have investigated the role of Facebook on the political participation (e.g., Gustafsson 2012; Quintelier & Theocharis 2012; Tang & Lee 2013). While those studies have contributed to the body of knowledge on the impact of SNS on the political participation, our literature review on the impact of the Internet (in general) and SNS (in particular) indicates that little effort has been made (1) to empirically validate the impact of SNS on the political participation focusing on *developing countries* and (2) to apply both *technological* and *social* perspectives to compare the impact of each influencing factor on the political participation via SNS. Further, we found that the majority of extant studies have measured political participation behaviors based on respondents' retroactive perceptions of their previous and current participation activities.

Therefore, the purposes of this study are threefold. First, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of SNS in the political participation in developing countries by focusing on the Cambodian Facebook users, where free political opinion sharing is not well encouraged in general (Meyn 2013). Second, this study proposes an integrated model (a combination of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al. 2003) and Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) (Verba et al. 1995)) to better explain the influencing factors on SNS users' political intention and behavior by comparing their impacts. Third, as suggested by Wu & Du (2012), this study investigates how strong the actual political behavior would be affected by SNS users' political intention, applying a longitudinal approach of coding actual political behavior data, measured by counting actual comments of each survey respondent one month after the survey.

We believe that investigating the role of both technological and social factors in Facebook users' political participation intention and behavior in Cambodian context will provide ample implications for both academia and practice. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first study that empirically tests the impacts of both technological (UTAUT-related) and social (CVM-related) factors on SNS users' political participation intention and behavior. In addition, this is one of a few empirical studies on the relationship between SNS and political participations focusing on developing countries, so that our research findings would be an important lesson for other countries with a similar political environment, where direct and public challenging or criticizing on the government is still a fear for most citizens (Greenwood 2013).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Literature Review on Political Participation via Internet and SNS

In order to identify a gap in extant research on the role of Internet or SNS in individuals' political participation, we have reviewed 20 recently published articles (Table of literature review is omitted due to the space limit). Since this literature review is intended to identify and compare empirical findings, we have looked into only empirical studies, while excluding conceptual or literature review papers. Our literature review provides the following several interesting points.

First, the role of Internet and SNS in the political participation has been empirically investigated under various cultural environments from eastern (e.g., South Korea, Hong Kong, and Pakistan) to western (U.S., Colombia, Sweden, Denmark, and Belgium) countries, although more number of empirical studies have been published with sample data from western and more developed societies such as U.S. and EU countries. Especially, quite a few studies have investigated the role of Internet and SNS in younger generations' political participation around the U.S. 2008 presidential election. As such, in general, the penetration ratio of Internet and SNS has been exponentially growing in developing worlds (Parent & Cruickshank 2009) and in particular, the role of Internet and SNS in the political participation of people in developing countries has been drawing significant attentions nowadays (Greenwood 2013). For example, the impacts of information and communication technology (ICT) (Pirannejad 2011) and SNS (Kurniawan & Rye 2013) on politics in the context of developing countries are recently investigated (Greenwood 2013; Meyn 2013; Soeung 2013). However, there are only a few published empirical studies on online political participation in the developing country context, conducted with a large number of samples and statistical analyses. Therefore, it is worthwhile to empirically investigate the phenomena of online political participation in Cambodia, one of developing countries, where people are actively participating in online political discussion via Facebook.

Second, quite a few studies looked into the impact of Internet or SNS use on political participation online or offline. Overall findings from these studies suggest that frequent use of or exposure to social media, online news, and SNS have positive and significant effects on individuals' online and offline political participation. For instance, Rojas & Puig-i-Abril (2009) found that online social network access (through mobile phones) is significantly related to political participatory behaviors through mobilization efforts. In addition, Shah et al. (2005) found that online information seeking via Internet news is positively associated with civic participation, and Baumgartner & Morris (2009) found that the usage of SNS news and podcast media positively influences online and offline political participation. While these findings definitely contribute to the body of knowledge on the role of Internet and SNS in the political participation, relatively little effort has been made to look into the technological beliefs about system embedded in SNS and their role in political participation intentions and behaviors. That is, although Facebook (the most popular SNS service in the world) is a service supported by Web 2.0 and ICT where people have access to it through diverse devices (e.g., PC, Smartphones, Tablets, etc.), only a few studies apply theoretical perspectives from information systems (IS) discipline that investigate the inter-relationship among the belief about the system, intention to use it, and actual behaviors of using the system. Among the studies in our literature review, only Koo et al. (2014) applied information systems success model (ISSM) by DeLone and McLean (2003) and empirically tested the impact of contents and system quality on individual's political participation via Facebook, while the rest of studies focused mostly on the use or exposure to SNS, forum, or Internet (e.g., Shaheen 2008), personal characteristics (Ha et al. 2013; Quintelier & Theocharis 2012), social aspects (Jensen 2013; Quintelier 2013), and political knowledge and efficacy (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Jensen 2013). Therefore, in this study, we propose an integrated model of UTAUT (Venkatesh et al. 2003) and CVM (Verba et al. 1995) to better explain and compare the impacts of both technological and social beliefs on intentions and actual behaviors of political participation via Facebook.

Third, we found that most extant studies considered political participation behavior as their dependent variable and measured it with self-reported perceptual measures, while not considering the mediating role of political participation intention in their research models. It is advised the studies that measure user's actual behavior applying a perceptual approach, with its influencing (independent) variables at the same time, can suffer from common-method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Therefore, in this study, we will measure our dependent variable (political participation behavior) by counting actual comments of each survey respondent one month after the survey, which will not only eliminate the threat of CMB, but also provide more rigorous findings on the relationship between political participation intention and its actual behavior via Facebook.

2.2 Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

Venkatesh et al. (2003) have proposed Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use (UTAUT) by considering diverse extant technology acceptance models, such as the theory of reasoned action, the social cognitive theory, the technology acceptance model, the innovation diffusion theory, the motivational model, the model of PC utilization, and the theory of planned behavior. This model posits that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and social influence of a certain technology positively influence behavioral intention to use the system, while facilitating condition and behavioral intention have a positive impact on actual use behavior. Performance expectancy is defined as the degree to which an individual believes that using a system will help her/him to attain gains in a certain performance for their goal (p. 447). Effort expectancy is defined as the degree of ease associated with the use of the system (p. 450). Social influence is defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe s/he should use the system (p. 451). Finally, facilitating conditions are defined as the degree to which an individual believes that there is important infrastructure to support use of the system (p. 453) (Venkatesh et al. 2003). In this study, we include all of these influencing factors in our integrated model to examine their impacts on Facebook users' political participation intention or behavior via Facebook.

2.3 Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM)

While UTAUT proposes the role of technological perceptions about an information system in users' intention and actual use, civic voluntarism model (CVM) suggests social factors that foster and maintain success for individual's voluntary participation in social movements such as political participations (Verba et al. 1995). Based on the social voluntarism perspective, the original CVM posits that resources, engagement, and recruitment positively influence civilian's political participation. While resources refer to individual beliefs that there are enough means such as time, money, knowledge, and skills available for social volunteering, engagement is defined as the variety of psychological predisposition, such as political interest, self-esteem, personal identification with a political party, and commitment to a specific policy. Lastly, recruitment refers to individual's experience in being recruited into various organizations, associations, or other types of social entity (e.g., church).

In this study, we redefined these three factors to better fit in the context of political participations in a developing country via Facebook, where people get free online accesses to any groups or others' accounts without much restriction, as follows; (1) facilitating conditions (the overlapped construct from UTAUT) for resources, (2) political interests for engagement, and (3) experience for recruitment, based on the following discussions. First, we combine technological supporting conditions (e.g., Internet access or Smartphones) from UTAUT and social supporting conditions (e.g., time or knowledge) from CVM into the construct of *facilitating conditions* in order to better explain SNS users' political participation. Thus, in this study, we define facilitating conditions as the degree to which an individual believes that all knowledge and resources s/he has, which support him/her to discuss about politics via Facebook. Second, among the various dimensions of engagement, we look into *political interests* as a key element for SNS users' political participation, since, among other constructs (e.g., self-esteem, personal identification, and commitment), the political interest is considered the most comprehensive force that could influence users' online political participation

intention. Lastly, since recruitment can be defined as individual's experience in being involved in his/her political networks or activities in the online political participation context (Verba et al. 1995), we replace recruitment into *experience* to better represent our research focus.

3 RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Based on the integrated perspective of UTAUT and CVM, we developed a research model in order to examine the impacts of both technological and social factors on SNS users' political participation intention and behavior in the context of developing country. The proposed research model is shown in Figure 1.

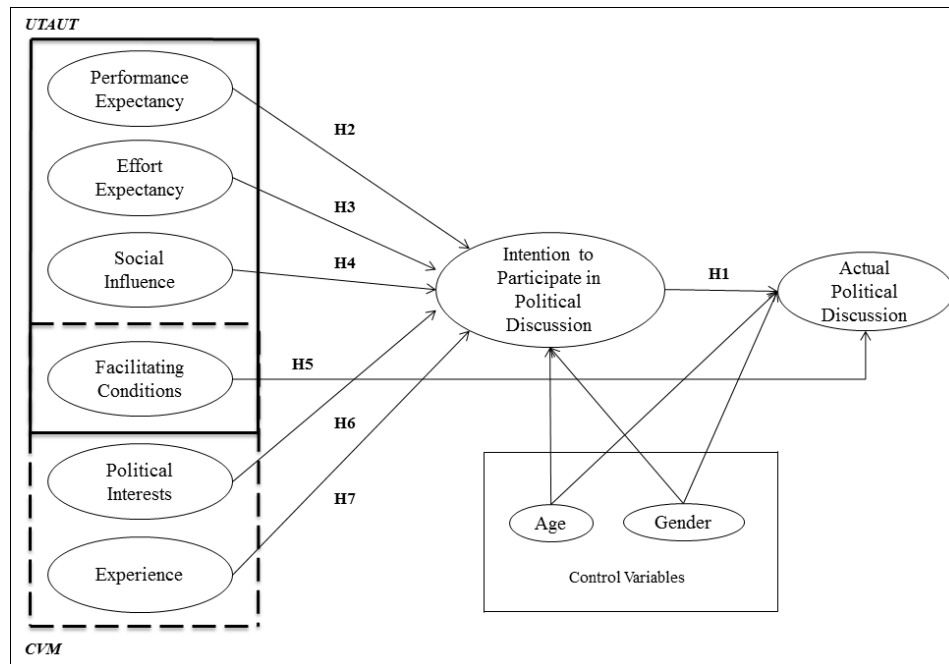


Figure 1. Research Model

3.1 Relationship between Intention to Participate and Actual Political Discussion

As suggested in the UTAUT model (Venkatesh et al. 2003) and many studies that found the positive relationship between *intention to use systems* and *actual use behavior* (Shih & Fang 2004), we expect that this relationship will hold in the context of political participation via Facebook. Once an individual have intention to participate in various political activities, which is affected by a number of technological and political factors, they will eventually participate in political discussion, because intention of a behavior has been found to be a significant predictor for actual behavior (Sheppard et al. 1988). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: *Intention to participate in political discussion has a positive effect on actual political discussion on Facebook.*

3.2 UTAUT-Related Influencing Factors

In the context of political participation via Facebook, performance expectancy means that an individual Facebook user believes that using Facebook to participate in political discussion will help them achieve their political goals (Venkatesh et al. 2003). That is, if an individual believe that participating in politics via Facebook can change their peers' (i.e., Facebook friends') opinions, so that s/he believes that her/his political participation behavior via Facebook may even change the world, they are more likely to have intention to participate in political discussions via Facebook.

Extant study also found that performance expectancy from an SNS is positively associated with intention to use the SNS (Kaba & Touré 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: *performance expectancy is positively associated with intention to participate in political discussion via Facebook.*

Effort expectancy means the ease of use of Facebook (Venkatesh et al. 2003). More specifically in the context of this study, it is the ease of use for a user to participate in political discussion via Facebook. If an individual found that creating her/his Facebook account, join political discussion groups, follows political leaders or activities, and write a postings with their political opinions on Facebook is easy, then they will more likely have high level of intention to participate in political discussion in Facebook. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3: *Effort expectancy is positively associated with intention to participate in political discussion via Facebook.*

Social influence has been found to be an important factor for individuals' behaviors with regards to political participation in a number of extant studies. For instance, Kim (2006) found that e-social capital positively influences the interested in participating in online political activities and Quintelier (2013) also found that peer influence and media exposure is positively associated with political participation. Moreover, both Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) and Tang & Lee (2013) found that social network characteristics (e.g., frequency and size) and social connection to political activities are positively associated with one's political participation. As such, if a Facebook user feels a social influence for participating in political discussion by looking at more number of friends in the SNS participate in political discussions in Facebook, s/he will be more likely to have intention to participate in political discussion via Facebook. Thus, we hypothesize:

H4: *Social influence is positively associated with intention to participate in political discussion via Facebook.*

Facilitating conditions in this study include technological conditions (e.g., Internet or Smartphone access to Facebook), political knowledge, and access to political discussion online. First, as suggested in UTAUT, technological facilitating conditions directly influence actual use behavior. That is, if one has an access to (mobile) Internet through PC or Smartphones, s/he will be more likely to use Facebook than those who have limited access to it. On top of technological facilitating conditions, if one has political knowledge and permission to access various political forums and politicians' fan pages in Facebook, they will be more likely to engage in political participation behavior via Facebook, as research also suggests that knowledge is one of the participatory and facilitating factors leading to political engagement (Kwak et al. 2005; Verba et al. 1995). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H5: *Facilitating conditions have a positive effect on actual political discussion.*

3.3 CVM-Related Influencing Factors

According to CVM (Verba et al. 1995), political interest is one of the most important motivators of political participation. Also, a couple of studies found evidence that political interest should influence political participation in offline context (Leighley & Vedlitz 1999; Tolbert & McNeal 2003). We suggest that the relationship between political interest and political participation intention and actual behavior can also be applied to Facebook users. That is, with access to Internet and online social networks, if a person has interest and s/he has access to online SNS, s/he will be more likely to participate in the discussion forums, engage in political discussion, or share political news and postings with their friend, than those who have not much interest in political issues. A couple of studies from our literature review also suggest that political interest is positively associated with political participation (Östman 2012; Quintelier & Theocharis 2012). Although they suggest direct relationship, we want to see if how the relationship between interest and actual participation is mediated by intention to participate in political discussion. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H6: *Political interests are positively associated with intention to participate in political discussion.*

Finally, the last factors for political participation in CVM (Verba et al. 1995) is recruitment, which entails the meaning of one's experience that one is involved in political engagement in our study. Although empirical evidence on the relationship between experience and political participation via SNS has not been found in extant literature, a couple of studies suggested that the openness to experience will lead Facebook users to political engagement (Ha et al. 2013; Quintelier & Theocharis 2012). Thus, we argue that if an individual has engaged in political activities for long time, they have more likely to participate in political discussion via Facebook, than those who as less experience in political activities. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H7: Experience is positively associated with intention to participate in political discussion.

3.4 Control Variables

Intention to participate in political discussion and actual political discussion are likely to be influenced by individual demographic characteristics such as age and gender. Therefore, we included age and gender as control variables. By controlling those two variables, the pure relationships between exogenous variables (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions, political interests, and experience) and endogenous variables (intention to participate in political discussion and actual political discussion) can be better validated.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is still under development. Since our research model is developed based on both UTAUT and CVM, most of the constructs, for the exception of actual political discussion, are derived from Venkatesh et al. (2003), Verba et al. (1995), and extant studies based on them. Table 1 shows operational definitions of all constructs used in our research model, along with the references. Since there is no prior research that measures actual political discussion, the calculation formula will be defined using a weighted average of Facebook users' actual political participation behaviors (e.g., posting political comments, sharing others' political comments with one's own comments, and sharing others' political comments without one's own comments). Data will be collected through an offline survey in two biggest cities in Cambodia. Target respondents are 18 years old and above Cambodian citizens who are allowed to vote and have an experience of Facebook use. After a one month of survey, actual political discussion will be measured using a self-developed formula through the observation of each survey participant's actual political activities in his/her own Facebook page. By doing so, we believe that we can reduce the threat of CMB and guarantee more rigorous findings on the relationship between political participation intention and its actual behavior. The structural equation modeling (SEM) technique will be used for an empirical validation.

Construct (Abbreviation)	Operational Definition	Reference
Performance Expectancy (PE)	The degree to which an individual believes that discussing about politics will help him/her to make positive change in his/her country	Venkatesh et al. (2003)
Effort Expectancy (EE)	The degree of ease associated to political discussion via Facebook	Venkatesh et al. (2003)
Social Influence (SI)	The degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe him/her should participate in political discussion via Facebook	Suksa-ngiam & Chaiyasoonthorn (2013); Venkatesh et al. (2013)
Facilitating Conditions (FC)	The degree to which an individual believes that all knowledge and resources s/he has, support him/her to discuss about politics via Facebook	Venkatesh et al. (2003); Verba et al. (1995)
Political Interests (PI)	The degree to which an individual believes that politics is not boring and s/he feels like talking about it	Verba et al. (1995)
Experience (EXP)	Time frame of being involved in political networks or	Verba et al. (1995)

	activities	
Intention to Participate in Political Discussion (IPP)	The degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior	Venkatesh et al. (2003)
Actual Political Discussion (APD)	The actual behaviors/activities related to political discussions in Facebook	Self-developed

Table 1. Operational Definitions of Constructs

5 POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The prospective results from this study are expected to contribute to the literature on political participation via Internet media and SNS. While prior studies have only focused on either technological or social influencing factors on online political participation, this paper is among the first attempts to investigate them from integrative and comparative perspectives. In addition, by introducing the new measure of actual political discussion through the observation of Facebook users' political participation activities, this research could help future research to find the relationship between users' intention and their actual behavior in diverse research contexts in a more rigorous manner. Other social factors such as political climate, regulation of SNS, fear of recrimination and perceived political intimidation (e.g., Mou et al. 201) can also be considered as influencing factors in future research.

Practically, this research is also aiming to benefit (1) the Cambodian government and Cambodian politicians – in terms of understanding Cambodians' political participation intention and behavior, (2) Cambodian people – in terms of using SNS (e.g., Facebook) for their own benefits, (3) managers of SNS platform providers – in terms of gaining benefits from users' behavior, (4) general business managers – in terms of preparing for their e-marketing strategies via SNS, and lastly (5) other developing countries with similar political situations. By highlighting the relative impacts of each factor in the context of developing countries, where direct and public challenging or criticizing on the government is still a fear for most citizens, this paper would provide an important lesson for other developing countries with a similar political environment.

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