
Social Media, Political Discussion, and Political Protest: A Case Study of the 2018 Political Protests in Iran

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 7 Issue 2, p. 89-103.
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kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian Communication
Studies Association
DOI: 10.17646/KOME.75672.33

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Abstract: The present paper examines the role of social media as a platform for political discussion and its effects on political protest. Social media users are expected to increase their political discussion within these social media, which will also boost their protest spirit in society. The statistical population of the study is Mashhad, the second-largest city in Iran, where 860 people were analyzed as a sample. The results depict that social media, either directly or indirectly, through the mediating variable of political discussion, reinforces the tendency to protest in society. Moreover, using social media for social interaction does not directly impact political protest, but this variable can indirectly increase the inclination to protest in society through the mediating variable of political discussion.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Discussion, Political Protest, Iran.

Introduction

Researchers have noted the tremendous advances in the field of information and communication technology in the past few decades as the basis for a new era called the Information Age in the process of transforming human civilization. In this era, communication and information technology is not merely an element like other elements, but it is the pivot and the main engine of the phenomenon of globalization because globalization of communications in the third millennium increasingly extends its effects to all cultural, economic, political spheres, and the social life of human life, and transforms the face of the world. The most important element in the process of this transformation is Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Now, in the early years of the new century, the domination of information and communication over public opinion, politics, economy, culture, and other areas of human life is unprecedented and has unique complexities. Since the second half of the 1990s, using the Internet in the economic, political, and social spheres has expanded in developed countries and to some extent in developing countries, and because of its widespread influence in various aspects of life, terms such as “the Global Village,” “Planetary Awareness,” and “the End of Geography” have become commonplace in academic circles. Today, mass media has dramatic effects on politics. As an increasing number of civil society actors use the Internet at

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Article received on the 28th February, 2019. Article accepted on the 12th August, 2019.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

the national, transnational, regional and global levels, the Internet's role becomes more evident in political interactions and challenges.

On the one hand, by accommodating a wide range of actors and political actors in society, the Internet and virtual social networks are instruments of political expression and dissemination of political, social, and cultural symbols, and beliefs of various social actors. On the other hand, this political discussion itself is a factor in protesting the existing political situation. Therefore, social networks are the most important manifestation of political protests in the new era, and politics and political developments are largely dependent on this massive and global medium.

Statistics show that there is a tendency in Iran towards membership and activity in social media, and Iranians always account for a significant portion of social media users. A good example is the presence of the Orkut social network in Iran in 2004, which could be considered the first emergence of social media in Iran. It grew so rapidly that Iran became the third-largest Orkut user after Brazil and America. Regarding the mobile-based communications media, Telegram is estimated to have about 24 million, WhatsApp 14 million, and Instagram 12 to 14 million Iranian users. This high volume of viewing and tracking news and content shared on social media by Iranian users shows the ability and capability of these social media to disseminate news and information in the community (Shams & Forghani, 2019). One of the reasons why the Internet and social media are becoming increasingly important in Iran is that, according to Iran Freedom House's (2019) data, Iran is an undemocratic country in which various online and offline media are under censorship and strict monitoring. However, the important thing here that doubles the importance of social media in Iran is that many people in Iran can circumvent the filtering system through proxies and filters, and to some extent freely access their desired information. In other words, after filtering out social media, many people try to re-access their favorite channels through the use of filtering tools instead of going to other sites and tools. Unlike other communication tools, social media continues to maintain its influence in Iranian society in order to influence various political, social, and cultural sectors of the society (Khodabakhshi, 2019).

Another point that makes this research significant is that Iranian society, in contrast to many other societies, is facing difficulties at the moment, which has made the issue more critical. From the first half of 2018, by withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the United States has severely undermined the Iranian economy, leading to rising inflation, unemployment, and the devaluation of the national currency (Landler, 2018). These economic sanctions and other sanctions imposed in the past have, in some cases, led to an increase in popular dissatisfaction with the desire for political protests in Iran. Of course, since many dissidents cannot make other people aware of their protests due to government control over many offline media such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines, so the only place they can achieve their goals is social media (Nouri & Gholipour, 2018). This has increased the importance of social media in Iranian society.

Accordingly, before investigating the research model, the present study will first discuss the political evidence and factors influencing it on the basis of research literature. Then it will empirically explore how social media may increase political discussion via expanding political protests.

Use of social media and political protests

The role played by mass media such as radio and television in influencing and directing public opinion on the basis of the minority interests of political elites has led the media, especially in authoritarian societies, to move away from their traditional function as the fourth pillar of

democracy (Chen, 2014: 101). Dominance of the interests of political and economic elites over media has undermined any hope of restoring their lost role in the process of democracy, and in such a situation the emergence of cyberspace with unique characteristics such as having discursive space (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008), synchronization of communication (Mills, 1991), interactivity (Kellner, 1997), learning and decentralization (Poster, 1997) facilitates free and equal access to public information for all and facilitates rational-critical conversations in cyberspace, contributing to the formation of public opinion and, ultimately, collective political action.

Most of the major arguments, however, contend that the Internet has strengthened participatory culture and democracy, but the volume of these effects seems to change under various political regimes. Unlike democratic governments where information circulated rather freely before the introduction of the Internet in their country, in authoritarian countries, despite all the efforts of these regimes to control cyberspace, the use of the Internet has made a major difference in their citizens' access to information (Ruijgrok, 2017). For this reason, it seems that the Internet and social media in authoritarian countries have a greater impact on the attitudes and activities of citizens in different political issues than in democracies. In this regard, Golkar (2015: 61) argues that although the political system in Iran has exercised widespread control over society in the past few decades, since the 1990s Iranian students have tried to make the best of cyberspace, and create a new space in order to cope with the dominant power of the Iranian government. In other words, while citizens of democratic countries can influence political issues in various ways (parties, political groups, newspapers, etc.), they are probably the only means available in many authoritarian countries to oppose government policies Online arenas.

Some scholars argue that from the second half of the 1990s, the Internet has been very effective in encouraging and organizing massive national, regional, and global protests in different societies either virtually or in real life. By rapidly spreading information about critical human issues and disseminating protest symbols, the internet has had an important role in instigating emotions leading to mass protests (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Most importantly, the networking of social movements through the Internet leads to the attraction of more supporters and internal cohesion and creating a coalition between them and other social actors (Anduiza and et al., 2014). Both of these cases can provide promising behavior by providing important political opportunities. Similarly, lack of networking is likely to lead to failure and interruption in protest movements. Therefore, cyberspace has great potential for peer searching, creating coalitions and coordinating campaign goals and tactics (Breuer, 2012).

One of the most important functions of cyberspace is networking and organizing activists and supporters within the social movements of the protest. In fact, the Internet and social media have the most important technical opportunities and facilities for the movements through which they organize the protests (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). Social media, with the compression of time and place, have increased the speed of communications and interconnections between activists and supporters of protest movements who are geographically apart from each other (Kaun, 2015). The new instrument has also been able to strengthen the weak links between activists and members of the movement, and the transfer of beliefs, ideals, institutions, goals and concerns of the movement to members through social media in intra-organizational cohesion and coordination of actions and protest activities (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Jost et al. (2018) argue that social media may have three reasons for facilitating political protests: firstly, social media facilitate information and news exchanges among protesters which is vital for the continuation of protests. Secondly, social media make it easier for protesters to exchange information with emotional and motivational content. And thirdly, the unique structural features of online social networks, which can be different from the political

context of that society, such as its political ideology, have a major impact on the disclosure of important information and thus the likelihood of the victory of political activists.

Use of social media and political discussion

Turning to virtual social networks enables Internet users to find the right answer for most of their online needs on those websites. On social networking sites, users can create personal profiles for themselves, including profiles, images, interests, and more. But the networking of these websites starts from the point where each user generates a list of friends, and these personal profiles are connected to each other. Each user can add friends who are on the same social network to their friends list. Users can also meet new people by searching for user profiles, viewing their profiles, and expanding their friends list. These are the most basic features of social networks and these websites have been working in recent years to provide more options for their users. Platforms like blogs and microblogging for writing short stories and daily and spatial notes, photo websites for putting personal photos, creating chat-like spaces for instant conversations among users, the ability to create conversation rooms, and fan pages similar to Internet forms are among the simplest of these possibilities (Van Dijck, 2013).

Anderson Analytics' website (www.andersonanalytics.com) claims that the most common reasons of joining social networks among users over time and among generations are as follow: friendship (75%), entertainment (55%), family contact (41%), invitations from an acquaintance (30%), contact with classmates (30%), contact with work network (5%), job search (4%), business development (3%), and others (5%). Given these results, it may seem at the outset that social networks are less political in nature, but it is undeniable that cyberspace has provided a new arena for discussion; a striking example of those blogs and social networking sites are women's in which they write and deal with subjects about which there is little possibility to talk in the real atmosphere of conversation (Howard and Parks, 2012).

Meanwhile, the field of politics has been influenced by this feature, or more precisely, by this ability of cyberspace, so that this space has become an arena for dialogue, political, party, and political events, and at times when important political events such as election is taking place, the atmosphere is affected (Shirky, 2011).

Nowadays virtual social networks are not the only new technological tools available to Internet users. Social networks can be considered beyond web sites, as media that have made changes by strengthening political dialogue in social, cultural, economic and political structures (Joseph, 2012). The challenges that social networks have faced in recent years have affected areas beyond the cyberspace. Social networks, as a type of social media, have provided significant interactive capabilities for Internet users and have contributed to increasing citizen participation in some processes. These networks have also transformed the field of political communication. Political events of recent years, from Barack Obama's election to the US presidency (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) to unrest after the 2009 presidential election of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Rahimi, 2011), all have been influenced by the activities of social network users. Given the fact that social networks provide spaces for in-group and outsourced communication as well as interaction between adversaries and opponents, they are considered suitable tools for political dialogue, so that, to some extent, these functions and capabilities of social networks can create a new "public domain" (Garnham, 1992). In a detailed account of Habermas's views on the public sphere and the discussion of Internet capabilities, Minavand (2008) concludes that the Internet has the ability to perform three functions of the public domain, namely, providing universal access, shaping public opinion and carrying out collective political action. Referring to Internet capabilities, he points out that the technical and communication capabilities of the Internet allow for the

implementation of the functions of the public domain as a means of dialogue; however, in the meantime, the availability of political, social and cultural conditions is necessary for the realization of such an issue.

Colman believes that the new information space can be a public neutral forum for exchanging democratic discussion, independent of government control. Theoretically, this forum can be consistent with the ideal dialogue conditions considered by Habermas in the field of the public domain (Colman, 1999: 206). Thus, the usefulness of social media in political life can be seen at every level of political decision-making; from the initial motivation and the provision of information from the political dialogue to the final decision-making stage. In the first place, access to programs, documents of political plans, reports, backgrounds and other documents will be facilitated through the use of the Internet and other modern communication tools. In the next steps, new cyberspace will provide diverse opportunities for citizens and social groups to communicate with policy makers to use virtual methods instead of traditional forms of participation. In addition, contacts between people and political and social institutions through social media reduces costs and eliminates the effects of time and space constraints (Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2016).

Political discussion and political protests

The differential gains model proposed by Scheufele et al. (2002) shows that the effects of the media are mainly based on increasing political discussions among people; in other words, the relationship between the media and the desire for political participation is stronger predominantly among individuals who discuss political issues. Various views have been presented by researchers as to why political discussions and dialogues as a mediating variable affect the relationship between social media and political participation. In this regard, Hardy and Scheufele (2005) argue that, firstly, dialogue between people can regulate the information obtained by the media. In this context, it is argued that the information available in the media, and in particular the new online media, hampers the adoption of effective decisions by individuals to engage in political activities because of the presentation of complex and sometimes contradictory news; for this reason, researchers argue that interpersonal political interactions and conversations in their online or offline forms make it possible for them to overcome the complexities and contradictions in such networks, and to better understand the true meaning of news. Secondly, interpersonal political discussions, either online or offline, facilitate the process of news and information that lead to participatory behaviors. In other words, political discussions with friends and relatives increase the motivation of individuals to try to understand events and political phenomena. In addition, this makes it possible for such people to have more information and news resources; resources that, according to Verba et al. (1995), are also influential factors in citizen participation in political processes.

The mediating role of political discussions in the relationship between social networks and political participation has been the subject of various experimental studies. For example, results obtained by Nisbet and Scheufele (2004) and Yamamoto et al. (2013) suggest that individuals who use social media and then actively engage in political discussion with others, have a more participatory attitude than others in political affairs. But the important point is that, given that social media often advocate democratization of society (Loader, B. D., & Mercea, 2012), it is only natural that such tools reinforce critical and protest thinking and discussions in closed and authoritarian societies (Valenzuela and et al, 2012).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: We expect the use of social media networks to increase positive tendency to participate in political protests in this study.

Hypothesis 2: This research expects that social media have a positive impact on the development of political discussion among individuals and can be strengthened.

Hypothesis 3: We expect the political discussion to expand the willingness of individuals to protest politically.

Methodology

Population and sample

In early 2018, riots broke out in Mashhad and then spread out to other Iranian cities. A survey of government officials showed that social media, especially Telegram, and the flow of news and information from them were one of the main reasons for the spread of riots in other cities of Iran (Kjaran, 2019; 11). And that is why, in addition to Facebook and Twitter which were blocked in the past, security agencies blocked some other social media, including the Telegram, shortly after the start of the protests (Kargar and McManamen, 2018).

Though different age groups participated in these roles, it seems that young people, especially students, were more active than other groups. As a result, we decided to examine the youth of Mashhad in a survey method. Research data was collected in January 2018 in Mashhad. According to the Statistical Centre of Iran, Mashhad has a population of 3,372,660 people making it the second largest city in Iran after Tehran (Iran's capital)¹. About 900 copies of a questionnaire were distributed among the participants who were selected via cluster sampling method. About 860 returned copies of the questionnaire were considered appropriate for data analysis.

Mashhad has 13 metropolitan zones. We first randomly selected 5 zones. Then, considering that the zones were still very wide, we randomly selected three neighborhoods from each zone as the basis for sampling. After completing these steps, we had 15 neighborhoods among which we attempted to randomly select some alleys. We were personally present in the alleys to select participants in the age range of 18 to 30 for submitting them the questionnaires for completion. Of course, given the unique political context in Iran, which the security institutions of the country show to political polls, prior to the release of questionnaires, we obtained the necessary permissions from the Mashhad University's security department to solve this problem. During the release of the questionnaires, respondents were reassured that the responses were completely confidential and should not be worried about this.

The mean age of participants and their standard deviations were 21.33 and 3.67, respectively (ranging from 18 to 30 years). Moreover, 59.9% of them were male and 40.1% were female. Also, 13.47% of the participants had low family income, 79.9% had moderate family income, and 6.7% had high family income. Finally, the results of the descriptive data of the research show that 86.2% of the participants had a diploma or BA/BSc degree, and only 13.8% had higher education degrees such as MA/MSc or PhD.

¹ <https://www.amar.org.ir/english>

Measures

1. *Using social media for news*: According to Zúñiga et al. (2012), four items were used to measure the use of social media indicators for news: to what extent social network sites helped individuals to stay informed and get news “about current events and public affairs,” “about their local community,” “about current events from mainstream media,” and “about current events through friends and family”, where 0 means never and 5 means all the time (4 items averaged scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.94$).

2. *Using social media for social interaction*: Consistent with Zúñiga et al.’s (2014) research, three items were used to examine this indicator. We specifically asked, “Thinking about the social networking site you use most often, how would you classify the following statements? (where 0 means never and 5 means all the time)” The statements were “I feel out of touch when I haven’t logged onto it for a day,” “I rely on it to stay in touch with friends and family,” and “I do not rely on it to meet people who share my interests (recoded)”. (3 items averaged scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$, $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.10$).

3. *Political discussion on social media*: This variable which consists of four items tries to identify to what extent people use social media to "write their own opinions about political issues and send it to friends and/or other people", "share photos or political clips," "discuss political issues," and "forward political commentary and news to friends or other people." (where 0 means never and 5 means all the time (4 items averaged scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$; $M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.30$).

4. *Political protest*: In this research, by political protest, we mean its attitudinal form that has been measured as the willingness of individuals to participate in various protest activities during the 2018 political protest. For this variable, 5 items were designed to ask people how much they would take part in activities such as "signing protest petitions", "participating in demonstrations", "participating in labor and trade strikes", "using anti-government symbols" and "distributing of anti-government declarations" (4 items averaged scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.72$; $M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.43$).

5. *Network size*: Individuals’ political discussion network size can have a significant impact on citizens’ political participation (Mutz, 2002). Accordingly, this research tries to achieve more accurate results by controlling this variable. Accordingly, participants were asked two questions about the number of people they talk online or face-to-face on political and public issues. For people with a network size of 1 to 5 people were given score 1, 6 to 10 people score 2, 11 to 15 score 3, 16 to 20 score 4, and bigger than 20 score 5. Moreover, participants who did not exchange in political discussions to anyone about political were scored 0 (2 items averaged scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$; $M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.19$).

6. *Improving party identification*: related literature suggests that improving party identification plays an important role in rising levels of participation (Lee and et al, 2013). There are currently two major political parties in the country, identified as reformist and principlist, each of which consists of the combination of several small parties. Accordingly, we tried to investigate the party identification using an 11-point variable. In this variable, number 1 represents highly conservative individuals. So as we approach towards number 11, the reformist degree of a person increases ($M = 6.78$, $SD = 2.21$).

7. *Internal political efficacy*: This study controls the variable of political efficacy. Findings indicate that there is a positive correlation between increasing political efficacy and political protest. In the study, two questions were used to measure internal political effectiveness: "People, like me, can influence government policies", "I have a good understanding of my country's political issues." where 0 means never and 5 means all the time (2 items averaged scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$, $M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.38$).

8. *News media use*: Respondents separately rated how frequently they use a variety of outlets to get news. Specifically, they were asked about their frequency of exposure to news through national TV, satirical news programs, national newspapers, radio, (4 items averaged scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$; $M = 2.14$ $SD = 1.09$).

Although the content of these media is sometimes different, Cronbach's alpha indicates that there is a fairly consistent correlation between the degrees of news media consumption, which is the main objective of measuring this variable.

Statistical analyses

To test the research hypotheses, hierarchical regressions were used. However, considering the fact that mediating variables have also been used in this study, structural equations utilizing AMOS 20 were employed to examine the theoretical model and to investigate the indirect effects of variables. Variance inflation factor was a multicollinearity between the use of social media for interactions and news items as 1.15, indicating that there is no multicollinearity among these variables.

Results

In line with the literature and the research hypotheses, it was observed that the use of social media, in both dimensions of interactions and news, has a positive correlation with the desire to protest. Nevertheless, in the fifth and final research model, it was only the use of social media for the purpose of acquiring news that had a significant effect on protest activity ($\beta = 0.145$, $p < 0.001$). Based on the final model of the research, results show that the total of the five models accounts for 24.24% of the final variance of political protest (see Table 1). In the final research model, among the control variables, the strengthening of party loyalty (identification) ($\beta = 0.066$, $p < 0.05$) and the size of networks ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.001$) had a positive effect on political protest leading to improved protest activity among individuals, but the level of education ($\beta = .111$, $p < .01$) is the only one that has had a negative effect on political protest.

Furthermore, according to the results of the research, political discussion on social media is another variable that has a positive and significant effect on the increase of political protest ($\beta = .082$, $p < 0.05$), which is also consistent with the theoretical literature. Finally, the results of the research model indicate that the F-value is significant in all of the investigated models and therefore, the five models seem to be acceptable.

Table 1. Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of Political Protest

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Age</i>	.065	.065	.020	.025	.024
<i>Female</i>	.106**	.101**	.052	.049	.047
<i>Education</i>	-.054	-.067	-.111**	-.109**	-.111**
<i>Income</i>	.017	.009	-.014	-.025	-.019
<i>Political efficacy</i>		.133***	.053	.048	.046
<i>Strength Partisanship</i>		0.084*	0.082**	0.062*	0.066*
<i>Network Size</i>			0.441***	0.414***	0.367***
<i>Media Use</i>			0.048	0.020	0.013
<i>S.M. News Use</i>				0.152***	0.145***
<i>S.M. Social Interaction</i>				0.013	0.000
<i>S.M. Pol. Discussion</i>					0.082*
<i>Total R2</i>	0.015	0.033	0.226	0.246	0.249
<i>F</i>	3.308***	5.877***	32.303***	29.046***	26.848***

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients reported. N = 860. *p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001

Table 2 indicates the effect of a set of predictive variables on political discussion within the social media. The results also indicate that both variables of using social media for news ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.01$) and using social media for interactions ($\beta = 0.157$, $p < 0.001$) have a positive and significant effect on political discussion within the social media. In addition, the R-Squared obtained in the final model of the research shows that the variance level explained by research variables is about 49.4, indicating that the predictive variables considered in the explanation of the political discussion are significant.

Among the research control variables, the two variables of income level ($\beta = -0.064$, $p < 0.01$) and party loyalty (identification) ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < 0.05$) had a negative effect on political discussion in social media, meaning that high-income individuals, as well as those who support more conservative political parties and political groups, tend to have less political discussion on social media. Moreover, two variables of network size ($\beta = 0.581$, $p < 0.001$) and the use of news media ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.01$) had a positive effect on political discussion among the research control variables, and increased the probability of participating in political discussions. The F-value and its significant level indicate that all the research models are significant and have the potential to explain the dependent variable of the political discussion.

Table 2. Hierarchical Logistic Regression Analysis of political discussion on social media

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Age</i>	0.053**	0.055	-0.011	0.006
<i>Female</i>	0.092	0.080**	0.013	0.022
<i>Education</i>	0.120**	0.097**	0.032	0.027
<i>Income</i>	-0.004	-0.010	-0.045	-.064**
<i>Political efficacy</i>		0.152***	0.031	0.025
<i>Strength Partisanship</i>		-0.029	-0.030	-0.054*
<i>Network Size</i>			0.615***	0.581***
<i>Media Use</i>			0.107***	0.085**
<i>S.M. News Use</i>				0.085**
<i>S.M. Social Interaction</i>				0.157***

Total R2	0.037	0.060	0.456	0.494
F	8.103***	9.013***	88.998***	82.779***

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients reported. N = 860. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

In addition, AMOS software was employed to study the structural relationships between the main research variables. The goodness of fit of the research model shows that it is well-fitted (Figure 1). The coefficient of determination indicates that 11% of the variance of online political discussions is influenced by social media and social media, either directly or indirectly, can explain the variance of the variable of political protest through the mediating variable of political discussion.

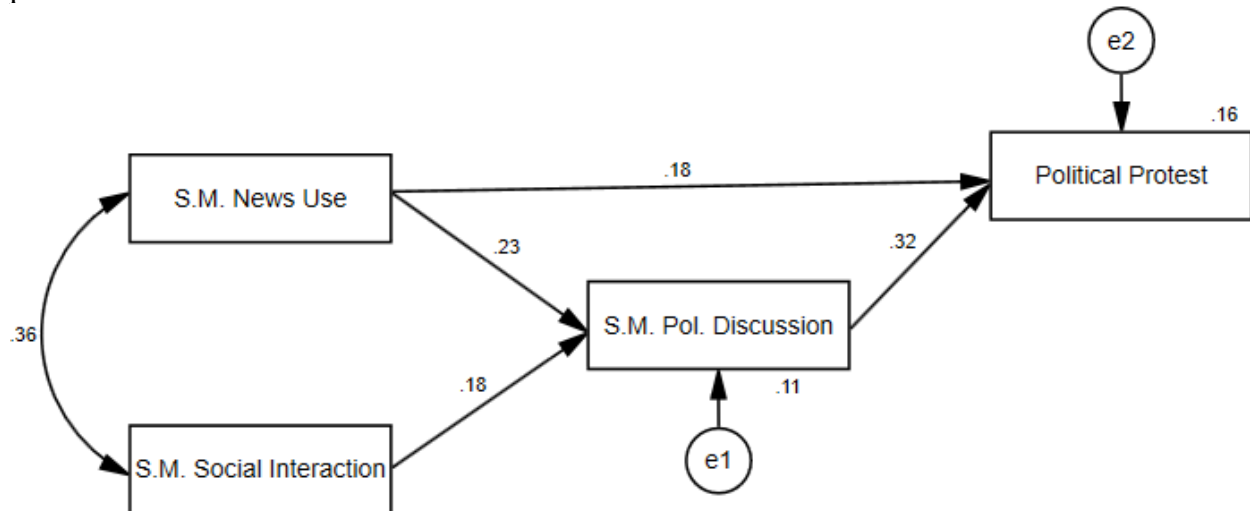


Figure 1 Results of SEM model of social media uses, social media political discussion, and political protest.

Note: Sample size = 860. Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients (betas) at p < .05 or better. Model goodness of fit: $\chi^2 = .59$; df = 1; p = .43; RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 1.000, GFI = 1.000, RMR = 0.011. Explained variance of criterion variables: Political discussion R2 = 11.2%; political protest R2 = 16.4. This theoretical model was also bootstrapped based on the standard errors with 1,000 iterations and with a 95% confidence interval.

The results obtained from the SEM indicate that both components of social media have had a positive and significant effect on strengthening political discussion within the online space. Discussions on social media have also had a positive and significant effect on increased protest behaviors in political subjects. The research results regarding the direct correlations of variables are consistent with the results obtained in the hierarchical regression previously mentioned.

Table 3 Direct and Indirect Effects of Social Media Use on Political Participation.

				β	
	S.M. Pol. Discussion	<---	S.M. News Use	0.228***	
	S.M. Pol. Discussion	<---	S.M. Social Interaction	0.177***	
	political protest	<---	S.M. News Use	0.177***	
	political protest	<---	S.M. Pol. Discussion	0.316***	
political protest	<---	S.M. Pol. Discussion	<---	S.M. News Use	0.072***
political protest	<---	S.M. Pol. Discussion	<---	S.M. Social Interaction	0.055***

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients reported. N = 860 *p < 0.05 **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001

The table indexes the direct and indirect results of social media on political protest. Standard coefficients show that the use of social media for news ($\beta = 0.072$, p < 0.001) and the use of

social media for social interactions ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$) indirectly and through political discussions within social media has had a positive effect on political protest. The Sobel test was used to determine the significance of the indirect effects of social media. As a result, a t-value of 5.48 was obtained for the indirect effects of using social media for news, and a t-value of 4.50 for using social media for interactions. Thus, it can be argued that considering the high t-value of 1.96, both social media dimensions have had a significant and positive effect on political protest. The important point in this regard is that although the regression tests in Table 1 show that the use of social media to interact directly did not have a significant effect on political protest, this variable may indirectly contribute to increasing of protest activities through online political discussions.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the effect of social media on political protests in the Iranian society in 2018. Previous theoretical literature showed that social media, through the creation of communication opportunities (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010), facilitate the speed of communication and improve interpersonal relationships (Kaun, 2015), thus enabling transfer of beliefs and goals of social movements to their members (Gerbaudo, 2018). Furthermore, the structural difference between social media content and the political context of authoritarian societies (Jost et al., 2018) may increase protest activities in individuals. By dividing social media consumption in two different categories, i.e. using social media for news and using social media for interactions, this study found out that although using social media for social interactions did not have any direct and significant effect on people's willingness to protest politics, using social media for news has been able to directly and significantly increase the participants' willingness to protest. It seems that this component is consistent with the findings of reviewed literature.

The second hypothesis dealt with investigating the relationship between social media and political discussions. Ideas in this field showed that social media, by strengthening intragroup and intergroup interactions (Garnham, 1992), creates an environment beyond the control of governments (Coleman, 1999) and eliminates the effects of temporal and spatial limitations (Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2016), thus increasing online political discussion among individuals. Consistent with reviewed literature, findings of this research showed that both using social media for news and for social interactions had a positive and significant effect on online political discussions, and have been able to discuss the extent of political discussions. The third hypothesis of the study addressed the role of the variable of online political discussions as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media and a tendency towards political protest. The Difference Gains Model (Scheufele et al., 2002) showed that the media, mainly through the spread of political dialogues among individuals, could enhance individuals' political activities. Moreover, some other researchers, arguing that information obtained through social media can be processed and understood better by political discussions, emphasized the role of mediating online political discussions (Hardy and Scheufele, 2005). Accordingly, the results of SEM, which are consistent with theoretical literature, showed that, firstly, political discussions had a significant and positive effect on the tendency towards political protests. Secondly, online political discussion as a mediating variable can play a positive and meaningful role in the relationship between the two dimensions of social media with a tendency to political protests. In other words, the results in this regard, in line with the views of Nisbet and Scheufele (2004), show that social media, with such characteristics as anonymous identity, lower likelihood of government censorships, and availability and ease of access to news, increase online political discussions among users by creating the right

opportunities for accessing information, which in turn can increase individuals' willingness to engage in activities associated with public and political affairs. However, as Valencia et al. (2012) point out, individuals express their demands and concerns in a critical and protest way because of the limited open spaces available for political activities in non-democratic societies. Therefore, in such a space, social media increase individuals' information and awareness and convince them to challenge the current situation and protest against the government through political discussions.

Conclusion

The findings from R-squared indicate that social media strengthens online political discussion in the community more than control and bipartite variables, indicating the significance of new communication tools compared to traditional ones. As a result, it can be argued that today, virtual social media platforms are not just novel technological tools providing interesting facilities for Internet users, but social media beyond websites can be considered as a medium that has changed social, cultural, economic, and political structures. Social media, as a new type of communication tool, has provided significant interactive interactions to Internet users and has contributed to increasing citizen participation in some processes. According to the results of this study, one of the effects of these media platforms is seen in expanding the participation of individuals in political discussion.

Nevertheless, research findings show that the positive effect of social media on political discussion was not the only significant effect of these new technological tools. Social media can also directly and indirectly affect the desire of individuals to engage in political protests in society. Social media has the power of mobilizing, that is, bringing people together in real time at one time or place, or bringing them together online in a virtual environment. These media, the interactive environment, are the daring people who see activity in these networks as a kind of civil activity and even civil struggle. Therefore, they do not hide from the brutal critique of sovereignty, politicians, and official media; that is why their language seems different from other media. Social movements are generated by the mobilization or gathering of groups of people. This mobility, on the one hand, means the displacement of the population, and on the other hand, means speeding up ideas, communications, and contacts. In this situation, those who are less likely to be linked to each other will have the opportunity to find one another.

Social media, on the one hand, increases political dialogue and, on the other hand, affects them in political relations, and since the public space of the city, especially in authoritarian countries, rarely exists for dialogue; as a result, the cyberspace becomes an area for dialogue. The main characteristic of this space and these virtual social networks is their dynamism, which, given the tools provided to users, makes people better able to show their political tendencies. On social media, space has been created that compensates for the limitations and barriers of real-life situations. Virtual media provides an opportunity for interactions, communication and message transmission, and other functions that the younger generation uses well. The functions of social networks and social media are different in any society, and their role in various issues can be acknowledged that social upheavals in Iran over the past few months are an example of the political function of these networks.

Why have social media and online political debate contributed to the formation of political protests in 2018 in Iran? To answer this question, first of all, it should be pointed out that most traditional media such as radio, television, newspapers, etc. are largely in the hands of the government, so that no radio and television station is at the disposal of the opposition, and in general, radio and television are completely run by the government. Even newspapers licensed by the government are at risk of having their license revoked if they publish articles

against the Islamic Republic of Iran (Faris & Rahim, 2015). In this regard, the annual Report of the World Press Freedom Index (2019) by the organization of Reporters Without Borders reports that Iran's position fell in 2018, with a 6-fold decline, with the exception of 11 countries that suppress media freedom. Thus, the status of Iran is at the bottom of the Freedom Index table, the 170th country in the world. This seems to be the result of a lack of free access to many traditional media such as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines, which has led many opponents to move toward social media. As Nissabet and Schoffel (2004) argue, social media is inherently less filterable than other media, and this helps the opposition to spread information and news. In this regard, the results on the Google Trends (2019) show that the number of searches on Google sites to download filter breakers to bypass social media filtering during political protests in Iran, especially in early 2018, when political protests reached their peak, has risen sharply.

Reviewing social media, especially Telegram, which many users in Iran are members of, shows that some of the channels presented by the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran as opposed and filtered are readily available in such media. They are working and delivering their news to audiences. For example, at the BBC Persian-language channel, there are currently over 930,000 members of the public, whose information can, at times, be fostered at the community level by political discussions that are not in line with government's views. Moreover, the Telegram Channel @sedaiemardom, containing a lot of deconstructionist content against the Iranian government, has over one million, two hundred thousand members, with news and information that has the potential to influence the political mentality of many people. In this regard, given the critical news available on many social media platforms, an atmosphere of discussion about issues that were once assumed to be obvious is provided. In other words, as Giddens (2013) argued, people doubt the thoughts that once seemed obvious and tried to rethink their consciousness in the new age. In Iran, social media has also been criticized for challenging the existing social, cultural, and political order. For this reason, such a space makes it possible for many people to discuss political issues in the country and the changes they desire in the political system of the country. But since many parties in the country are banned for various reasons, some people cannot transfer their requests to the political system of the country in a standardized and peaceful way. This puts the country's political atmosphere in the face of street protests.

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