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Towards the Egyptian Revolution: Activists' perceptions of social media for mobilization

ABSTRACT

The role that social media could play in engaging people in the democratic process has recently gained more attention following the series of mass protests and revolutions that has swept the Arab region starting with Tunisia, then emulated in Egypt, and now taking place in Libya. It has been argued that those revolutions were linked, at least in the preliminary stages, to the active use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This article attempts to shed light on these assertions by reporting some early observations from a study which was conducted immediately prior to the revolution in Egypt. In particular it explores the young activists' perceptions of the potential of social media for mobilizing activism in authoritarian regimes. It thus helps situating social media (SM) in the spectrum of political engagement by gauging young activists' motivations for utilizing those outlets for political participation aimed at social and political change. This article relies on a survey of a snowball sample of young Egyptian activists, along with focus group discussions (FGD) also, to seek answers to questions about contextual factors such as media scepticism, political efficacy and fear of authority, which are expected to relate to social media motivations and users' tendencies to engage in forms of online and offline political participation. The findings indicate that young activists were

mainly driven by guidance and surveillance needs in their political utilization of social networking sites. A strong positive correlation between online and offline political participation was also detected.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, Egypt has witnessed many incidents that may suggest that Egyptian people, and particularly youth, are becoming keener on political participation to attain change and democracy. With the rapid spread of the Internet, scholars and commentators argue that Internet users could challenge 'actual concentrations of media power' (Couldry and Curran in Arvizu 2009: 388) and practice what Carroll and Hackett (2006) called 'democratic media activism' through building communication networks (Arvizu 2009: 388) and creating their alternative arena for political participation. The very recent history showed how Egyptian youth used blogs to interact and keep up the high spirits until they find the right moment to go 'offline' and practice their right of expressing their opinions freely (Shamir 1995). A number of social movements and civil activism evoked by Egyptian citizens were either parallel to, or even stimulated by interaction between, loose network groups of young people using the Internet as a working environment so that virtual and reality experiences create a congruent space of communication (W. S. Fahmi 2009: 90). Youth for Change movement, the Egyptian Bloggers movement and the April 6 movement's call for national strike, are only to name some.

Egypt witnessed 1000 social protests between 1998 and 2004 in which the protest rate increased by 200 per cent from 2003 (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011). The eagerness to show discontent and claim political and socio-economic reforms was reflected in an unprecedented number of oppositional demonstrations, rallies and the formation of nonviolent dissident groups Egypt witnessed in 2004–05 (El-Mahdi 2009: 1011).

On 25 January, a series of daring consecutive anger protests sparked off in Cairo culminated in a massive revolution provoked mainly by youth, and led to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak being ousted from his office when he yielded to an 18-day mass demonstration calling for democratic reforms.

Although incidents may suggest a positive link between using social networking sites and political mobilization, this research aims to contribute a new dimension to the ongoing debate on the potential of social media for democratic engagement by shedding light on the relationship between different perceptions of social networking sites utilities and political participation, both on and offline, in authoritarian regimes where the context is different than in well-established democracies and may hence yield different findings. Conducting the current research in the critical period between the parliamentary (fraud) elections of 2010 and the uprisings of January 2011 counteracts enthusiastic responses which might arise after the revolt, and helps to capture a more reliable picture regarding social media potential for engaging people in politics. Moreover, this study helps address the need for understanding the individual citizens' engagement in politics in relation to contemporary technology as mentioned in previous research (Bimber 2001) with respect to specific contextual factors related to the studied society.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS) AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

With the proliferation of the Internet a vigorous debate was generated on the medium's capacity for engaging people in politics. Research in this path yielded mixed findings. On the pessimistic side, scholars were sceptical about the potential of the Internet for enhancing or enabling democratic participation. The Internet has been blamed for replicating the same patterns of offline participation rather than creating new opportunities for involvement. It was argued that using the Internet can reinforce the digital gap by engaging online those who are already engaged offline (Bimber 2000; 2001; Gennaro and Dutton 2006). Concerns were also aroused about detaching citizens from political engagement due to the time spent online (Shah et al. 2002; Putnam 2000).

Another group of scholars have adopted an optimistic line of thinking, stating that the Internet has the potential and can act as a catalyst for political participation. The Internet is a source of political news that can bridge the gaps in mainstream media coverage of political issues such as elections (Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Evidence from recent research shows how the Internet can have the capacity to expand the numbers of the politically active, especially in the online environment (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005; Krueger 2002). Reducing the cost (time, price and effort) of acquiring political information and allowing convenient opportunities for participation can attract more citizens to get involved in political activities (Boulianne 2009; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). In authoritarian regimes, where freedom of expression is suppressed, convenience and low cost can also include the Internet's capacity to reduce risk levels that might be attached to practising politics in such regimes.

Abdel Rahman Yousuf, the former coordinator of the National Association for Change, stated in an interview that:

> The advantage of the Internet is that it opens a window outside the monitoring zone of the authority, or this is how people think. Authorities can monitor the Internet, but it cannot monitor everyone online. Online, there is no physical activity to monitor, users do not leave their fingerprints online, or so users believe. Joining an online group does not necessarily make the group members responsible for the demonstrations on the streets, and it is impossible to imprison 250,000 members in 'El-Baradei for Presidency' group, or 400,000 members in 'We Are All Khaled Said' group on Facebook, but they can still do that with people on streets. Hence, the Internet offers that level of 'safety' for its' users which makes the mere activity of joining online groups for citizens who were governed for thirty years by the emergency law a form of breaching the fear boundary, and it also implies a level of initialization. If the Internet users perceive joining online groups as a brave act, this means that they defeated their fear, even if only relatively.

Scholars have perpetuated the same logic regarding social media utilities. It has been argued that the Internet could play a crucial role in triggering people's willingness to express their opinions through the networking function (Shen et al. 2009) as reference group could provide sufficient support to stimulate individuals' outspokenness even when they feel they are in a clear minority (Vitak et al. 2009; Neuwrith and Frederick 2004). This social support granted through an online network was found to be more present in 'large'

1 In late 2007, a cell phone video posted on YouTube by famous Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas led to the prosecution of two Egyptian policemen who were convicted of torture (Pintak 2008: 1). In 2008, Facebook was efficiently utilized to promote public protests on 6 April and 4 May demanding better salaries, controlling high inflation rates and solving bread and steel crisis. In June 2010, a Facebook page named 'We Are All Khaled Said' was created upon Said's murder to condemn police brutality. A number of demonstrations that sparked off and spread in Cairo and Alexandria have been linked to calls posted on that page.

interpersonal networks as members of such groups would feel more 'confident' to express their views.

Smitten (2008), on the other hand, argues that although the Internet has the potential to enable online communities to act politically, there are also limitations that could make 'the predominant effect of political action of online communities […] the arousal of public attention as a sign of successful articulation of interests'. Some political online communities, according to Smitten (2008) lack organization around well-defined political objectives, and even if they assess those objectives, they may face the difficulty of accessing the political system, especially in dictatorships and non-plural societies. This may impose difficulties on bridging online activism to the offline context to make social and political change feasible. Additionally, the inner structure of online communities does not follow a certain law on organization, which poses questions on the quality of 'decision making' and 'policy formation' of these communities and serves as a justification to take them lightly within the political arena (Smitten 2008: 51). Boyd argues that 'activists' are not being realistic in their evaluations of the potential of social networking sites for empowering ordinary citizens (Boyd 2008a). But, on the other hand, there are conditions under which online communities could outreach public opinion and gain political weight; drawing the attention of traditional media is one of the most important conditions for online communities to achieve publicity. Additionally, Smitten suggests that online communities could get help in organizing offline events through cooperation and coordination with traditional pressure groups and thus make advantage of their contacts and experiences (Smitten 2008).

In authoritarian regimes, the participatory context is completely different than of well-established democracies where most evaluations of social media potential have taken place (Brandtzaeg and Heim 2009). It was found that in a context of media censorship people's beliefs about the empowerment capacity the Internet could play are shaken, which suppresses their willingness to speak out their opinions online as Internet efficacy in this case has nothing to do with their readiness to speak out (Shen 2009). It could be said that political apathy under such regimes may be imposed on citizens who are not allowed thorough opportunity to participate in politics due to limitations in the political structure under which they operate (Zaki 1994). Evidence from reality may suggest that social networking sites could operate differently in such societies, although limitations may still hinder utilizing those media platforms to penetrate the 'real' political arena.

Young citizens have repeatedly utilized social networking sites to mobilize dissent against high inflation rates and government corruption. Egyptian bloggers' activism has repeatedly embarrassed the government to prosecute security-violating practices that have long been overlooked (Pintak 2008: 1). Several public strikes and demonstrations took place in the last five years and were mobilized via social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube.[1] Nevertheless, there is no evidence of direct coordination between the '"Facebookers'" virtual activism and the demonstrators' physical mobilization' (W. S. Fahmi 2009: 105). Additionally, the short life span of the uprisings mobilized by young activists might suggest a low level of commitment among members (Ottaway and Hamzawy 2011).

Aliaa, a 29-year-old female journalist and activist commented:

When we compare to El-Baradei group on Facebook, or other pages created for example, to support an arrested blogger named 'Together we…' I think

this is just an emotional reaction. For example, when El-Baradei called for 'change', people aspired for that and rushed to engage, but then they started to think. Moreover, and very simply, when you receive an invite on Facebook to a strike people might think to reply 'attending' whether they will actually attend or not on the understanding that nobody will follow them and ask why they did not attend. We do not monitor each other, we don't even know each other, and this is the case for most people online, most of them do not meet and do not even know each other.

In her research of the role of new media in the emergence of youth publics in Cairo, Arvizu (2009) focused on youth creativity in developing new communication channels to use as a form of activism to create alternative public communication networks for critical discussion about state and society. Egyptian youth, who mainly belong to upper-middle class and received western-style education, did not exist before. They were aiming at drawing attention to their role as part of the Egyptian and Arab society. Through the use and consumption of new media (in this case desktop publishing), Egyptian youth practice a new type of social movement and participate in the creation of new civic publics in Cairo. In the same line, Dahlgren (2009) argues that actual participation in public sphere is preceded and shaped by civic culture as democracy has two dimensions: first is the sociocultural environment which shapes people's capacity to participate in the second, which is the public sphere and political society where the cultural component meets the communicative spaces to configure and facilitate democratic life. The massive, ground-swelling demonstrations that sparked off in Cairo on 25 January resulting in the ousting of former-President Mubarak in eighteen days 'seem to demonstrate the validity of civil society assumption' (Meital 2006).

However, whether those platforms could invigorate robust offline political participation – especially among ordinary citizens – and feed into a real democracy still needs further investigation; especially when taking into account the special conditions of the Egyptian society, where the total adult illiteracy rate is about 34 per cent (UNICEF 2005–08), with Internet users composing only 21.2 per cent of the population located mainly in urban areas, and 4,077,520 of them are Facebook users with a penetration rate that slightly exceeds 5 per cent (Anon 2010a).

'NATIONAL' MEDIA SCEPTICISM AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Media use is one of the factors expected to shape political engagement. A double-track channel of communication is crucial for democratic engagement. That is, to engage in politics, individuals need to be informed about important issues, as well as being able to voice their opinions to large publics. In authoritarian regimes, state-owned/operated media function as mouth pieces of the government, and hence impose strict control over activities that are classified as a threat to the status quo. Moreover, those media functioning in such regimes could provide a hampered treatment of opposition activities in order to mislead the public opinion. This code of practice is expected to magnify in time of social conflict or national crisis (Zaki 1994) as political participation is more likely to fall outside the traditional system, and hence receive no or unbalanced coverage by mainstream media (Boyle and Schmierbach 2009). During the Egyptian revolution – and even before that when the revolution sparked off in Tunisia – the coverage provided by the so-called 'national' media was far from

2 The 25 January revolution was widely linked to an event invitation posted on 'We Are All Khaled Said' Facebook page by Wael Ghoneim, the creator of the page, as well as an agitating direct-to-camera video posted on YouTube by a 26-year-old activist Asmaa' Mahfuz.

mobilizing or reinforcing participatory politics. Rather, protesters were negatively framed in order to hinder their activity (McLeod 1995). Such negative representations were evident in the use of marginalizing frames and the use of smearing labels (Shoemaker 1984). Previous research suggests that biased coverage results in negative evaluations, and hence sceptical tendency towards mainstream media content, which is perceived as being inaccurate, incomplete and not trustworthy (Tsfati and Capella 2003). Hala Fahmi, a recently resigned national TV anchor stated that 'the national media performance was part of a plan to marginalize Egyptian people and [deceive] them into believing that the governing regime is the best they can get' (H. Fahmi 2011).

When political actors face obstacles to utilizing mainstream media for mobilizing purposes, they turn to alternative resources in order to achieve their goals. Mainstream news scepticism was found to relate positively to Internet use for political information (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Tsfati and Cappella 2003; Tsfati 2003). Social networking sites represent a media environment over which users can have more control. They can practice active forms of communication; they use, interact with, and even create content. It allows them an opportunity to build their own network of friends and acquaintances to discuss issues of mutual interest. As such, social networking sites can serve as alternative platforms where young activists – most likely to be excelled from traditional participatory spectrum – can disseminate mobilizing information and reinforce the importance of participation through discussing political issues with like-minded people. They can practice forms of political activism which may or may not result in practicing politics offline where other factors may interfere to bridge the two contexts.[2] Over those platforms, activists can counteract the controlling role of the government over mainstream media and circumvent the negatively practiced demobilizing role. They can draw the public's attention to important issues of concern and even force mainstream media to provide the least coverage of sensitive issues

INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL EFFICACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political efficacy is one of the important political factors that were found to have an influence on an individual's tendency to participate in politics (Zhang et al. 2010). In a country like Egypt, where the regime suppresses opposition and hinder active political participation, especially when it contradicts the elite's interests, it is expected that individuals may accumulate a feeling of inefficiency as they tend to believe that exerting change is beyond their capabilities (Abramson and Aldrich 1982).

Mahmoud, a 22-year-old final year journalism student, expresses that feeling:

> I feel more enthusiastic to vote in a sports club election rather than voting for governmental officials. When doing so, I am sure that my voice will matter, and the result will reflect my wishes and demands. But when it comes to politics like in parliamentary or presidential elections, the results are already known, so why bother?

Aliaa', a 29-year-old female journalist and activist, commented:

> I have a feeling that this is the best they can do; to join an online group, or to 'like' a page, but when it comes to taking to the street or making

a statement, the numbers are very moderate. This could be ascribed to the belief that 'nothing could be done'. Demonstrating could be a positive reaction, but they do not know what to do next or if anything further could be done. So when they take to the street once, they do not do it again. And those who insist on creating events on Facebook find that the picture is not rosy as they thought it might be and that they cannot change the world.

However, scholars have proposed that political efficacy could be increased via several factors. Nevertheless, many have failed to situate Internet use amongst those factors (Kaye and Johnson 2004; Jennings and Zeitner 2003; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Lina and Lim 2002). When it comes to online partic-ipation, political interest and efficacy as motivations of offline political partic-ipation were found to be moderated by the effect of Internet proficiency; that is, even when individuals are interested in politics and feel politically effi-cient, they will not tend to practice politics online if they do not acquire a sufficient level of Internet efficacy (Gennaro and Dutton 2006). This may add another limitation to Internet potential for mobilizing political engagement.

FEAR OF AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Some may readily suggest that using social networking sites could be the panacea for the illnesses of free expression imposed by authoritarian regimes; as users could interact anonymously and discuss sensitive issues more freely via those platforms. Vitak et al. (2009) argue that Facebook might have the potential to provide a low-risk arena for users to interact with one another about politics, which might be highly beneficial for discussing sensitive or inappropriate issues such as politics and religion.

Interestingly, young activists have almost agreed that using nicknames as a precaution of monitoring their activism online would harm trust relations among online participants and lead to unintended consequences. As Ahmed Maher, a 30-year-old activist put it:

> Users will be more afraid of those who hide their names and identities, and this could create a problem. And I generally do not think that it's wise to have conflicts with people and authorities if you aim at achieving change; nonetheless, things should be discussed wisely to bond people around a certain idea and to run a rational informed political discourse, otherwise, I don't think it would be fruitful. And I believe that only few people engage in such discourse under pseudonyms.

On the other hand, bridging participation to the offline context in order to acquire feasible change may impose more hurdles due to the expected direct confrontation with authorities. Hence, more intensive feeling of fear may evoke and cause withdrawals from active participation as suggested by previ-ous research (Willnat, Lee and Detenber 2002).

Egypt, as well as many developing countries, has witnessed waves of reforms towards democracy, but has also, among other countries of the Middle East region, managed to escape those changes and hold to what could be named the 'flexible authoritarian' regime (El-Mahdi 2009: 1011; 1029). Although freedom of expression is de jure guaranteed, it is widely suppressed de facto, and can only be practiced within the understanding of the 'red lines' especially when

dealing with the image of the country or national concerns (Amin 2002: 128). Accordingly, Egyptian citizens are operating under an insupportable environment which imposes several limitations on their free participation. But young activists believe that a cohort of the Egyptians can set the example and lead the masses to reform. As Ahmed Maher, a 30-year-old male activist, puts it:

> I think it's absolutely impossible to change the whole population, but I know from the history of social movements all it takes is a strand of the people who is strong and united and have a clear vision and a certain goal that they seek to achieve and they eventually succeed. Egypt has such strand, but they only lack the breaching of fear boundary. A general in the army once swore to me that if people move, nothing will stop them; neither the police nor the armed forces, and he is speaking from within the regime about conflict scenarios. When we break the fear barrier, only then we can achieve change.

Islam, a 21-year-old male activist, explains how the fear barrier was broken:

> I was taken to the state security office many times. What made me fearless is that I was practicing politics in the college knowing who the agents and the informers are, and they were known for all activists at the university. For example, when the student union elections were fraud we hanged a courgette (a symbol of favouring) on the door of the security office and we uploaded a picture of it on the website of the University of Tanta. They took my father as well to the state security to intimidate both of us, but they cannot do anything because they consider us – the youth – of very tiny or no impact at all in of ourselves and that we are directed and lead by weighty politicians.

MOTIVATIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This perspective reinforces active images of audiences. With the proliferation of the Internet, many scholars have crossed the line of 'who' and 'what' and address the question 'why' certain audience uses specific kind of media (Kaye and Johnson 2004). Studying motivation rather than impact helps getting a better idea on potentials social network sites hold for enabling political actions (Boyd 2008a). Social networking sites have received a level of uses and gratifications' attention, albeit this attention has been by and large focused on general audience – usually college students who tend to be heavy users of social media (Liu, Cheung and Lee 2010; Shao 2009; Stoeckl, Rohreier and Hess 2007). Few studies have applied uses and gratifications rationale on politically interested Internet users (Kaye and Johnson 2004; Johnson and Kaye 2003), only few studies have deployed the approach to explain how Internet users utilize social networking sites in particular to fulfil political needs (Leung 2009; Cozma and Ancu 2009; Park, Kee and Valenzuela 2009; Hanson, Haridakis and Sharma 2008).

Users of user-generated media (UGM) practice different forms of activities (i.e. consuming content, interacting with content and/or with other users and producing content) to gratify different needs. Those gratifications, according to Shao (2009), are enabled by the 'easy to use' and 'let users control' media attributes (Shao 2009). An online survey of 489 bloggers and video bloggers showed that content generators were motivated by the satisfaction they feel

out of practicing the activity in itself. On the other hand, non-producers or 'lurkers' were demotivated the most by factors of time consumerism and technical restrictions – especially for video blogging (Stoeckl, Rohreier and Hess 2007).

Leung (2009) found that UGM users were motivated the most by the desire to be recognized. Interaction with the recipients of the content they produce was the most stimulating media attribute of their online content-generation activity. These interactions and discussions, according to Leung (2009), feed into building and reinforcing a cyber community with common interest. Stressing the importance of social and cultural components for political engagement, he explains the weak relation – evident only when tested between content creation online and external political efficacy – as that democratic culture in Hong Kong – a British colony for 100 years until 1997 – is still 'immature' and, accordingly, content generators might have had concerns about sharing political content in public spheres (Leung 2009). Political surveillance motives were strongly related to certain forms of political activities, such as watching new, political ads and direct-to-camera videos (Hanson, Haridakis and Sharma 2008). Cozma and Ancu (2009) found that voters visited MySpace profiles of primary candidates during the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States mainly for social interaction with supporters with whom they share similar interests, followed by information seeking and entertainment. While information seeking and entertainment come in the front among gratifications of consuming online political content, they rear to the benefit of social interaction on MySpace and SNSs more broadly (Cozma and Ancu 2009). In the same line, habitual entertainment and information seeking were the most dominant purposes for using YouTube during the 2008 US presidential primaries (Hanson, Haridakis and Sharma 2008). Though those findings may contradict with previous research on reasons behind using political media content, they are consistent with the nature of social networking sites. Nevertheless, it was found that users who rely on social networking sites for political information are more likely to practice political activities than others. Facebook group use for recreational gratifications was not found to encourage users' participation in political events in comparison to practicing civic activities (Park, Kee and Valenzuela 2009; Zhang et al. 2010).

In addition to media motives, researchers have studied how social and psychological perspectives of media users may interfere to shape the relation – if any – between media motives and different forms of political consequences and outcomes. Kwon and Nam (2009) argue that psychological characteristics assessed by both emotional (i.e. angry, concerned, afraid, sad and defiant) and ideological factors (i.e. the need to express one's views on an issue, obligation and responsibility) act as catalysts for social movement participation. Leung (2009) stated that Internet users who read, write and comment on other people's blogs and post videos on YouTube feel more psychologically empowered, which may reflect on their actual participation in their community. Intensive use of Facebook was found to feed into stronger feelings of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Valenzuela, Park and Kee 2008). Weaker relation was reported for social trust (Valenzuela, Park and Kee 2008). However, special political and psychological characteristics that could be related to the context in authoritarian regimes were overlooked in previous reserarch.

Additional to the scarcity of the studies that illuminate the area of political uses of social media outlets, which were originally generated for social

and personal purposes, the vast majority of those studies have examined the motives associated with online social media use within a social and political environment that totally differs from the structural elements of the Egyptian society under which the targeted audience of the current research operate. These social circumstances are expected – according to uses and gratification research – to produce different motives and gratification outcomes that result from or associate to using particular media (Rosengren 1976).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to explore the reasons behind active utilization of social networking sites by Egyptian activists in the period that preceded the 25 January revolution in an attempt to gauge the weight of social media as platforms for political mobilization. In doing so, I also attempt to understand the relationships among contextual factors represented – for the purpose of this study – in political efficacy, political interest, media scepticism, Internet political efficacy, fear of authority and demographics by seeking answers for the following questions:
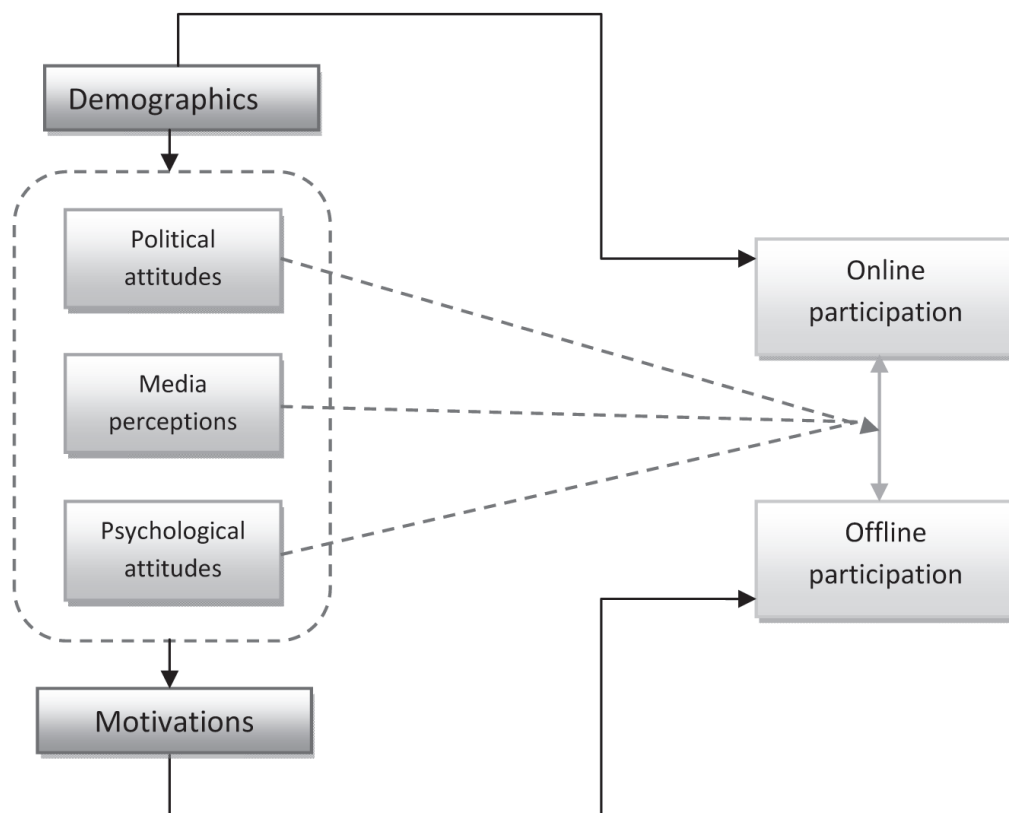

Figure 1: The sugges1ted research paradigm.

RQ1: What are young Egyptian activists' motives for using social media (SM) for political communication?

RQ2: How do demographics, political attitudes (political efficacy), media perceptions ('national' media scepticism) and psychological attributes (fear of authority) relate to social media motives?

RQ3: How do social media antecedents (contextual factors) and motivations predict behavioural outcomes of social media use (i.e. online political engagement)?

RQ4: How does online political participation relate to offline political engagement, and to what extent do political efficacy, media scepticism and fear of authority mediate that relationship, if any?

The following diagram shows the main research variables and delineates the suggested relationships between them:

METHODOLOGY

Data collection and sample

This study was conducted in a very special political context; data collection started five days after the first and second rounds of the parliamentary elections of 2010, which were marked by irregularities, violence, blockage of media representatives and fraud. Due to the disappointing results of the elections, feelings of discontent were dominant and the context was tense. Ten days after data collection completion, Cairo exploded in massive protests. Accordingly, it is expected that conducting the field study in this period could be efficient in gauging activists' perceptions on social media potential as means of mobilization.

Data for this research was collected via a survey of a snowball sample of Egyptian activists aged 18 to 35. The actual fieldwork ran between 10 December 2010 and 18 January 2011. 650 questionnaires were disseminated amongst initial contacts who started the snowballing technique. Participation in the study was voluntary and full anonymity of participants was guaranteed. The response rate was 56.46 per cent with a total of 367 complete questionnaires, which went into data entry and evaluation processes after excluding 35 questionnaires for inconsistency and/or incompletion. A sample of participants who mentioned their readiness to take a further step in the research by providing their contact information in the questionnaire were contacted and invited to participate in a focus group discussion (FGD). This yielded three complete FGDs with young activists from different political backgrounds.

Measures

SNS motivations items were adapted from previous uses and gratifications research (e.g. Kaye and Johnson 2004; Kim and Kim 2007). 'Networking' was added to the scale to allow respondents to indicate whether they use SNS to build their own community of friends and aquaintances in order to outreach larger audiences with their political views. Respondents indicate the reasons of using SNS for political purposes on an index of nineteen items split into six motivational categories; guidance (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$), surveillance (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.68$), networking (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.67$), social

utility (Cronbach's α = 0.65), entertainment (Cronbach's α = 0.79) and convenience (Cronbach's α = 0.75), where 1 meant 'strongly disagree' and 5 meant 'strongly agree'.

Online political participation was measured with an aggregate scale composed of seven items (Cronbach's α = 0.87) where 1 meant 'never', and 5 meant 'very often'. Respondents were asked whether in the past year they had (a) Joined or left a group about politics; (b) Started a social or political topic for discussion; (c) Posted links to news stories relating to a political or social cause; (d) Posted links to videos relating to a political or social cause; (e) Created or invited others to participate in an event related to a political or social cause; (f) Signed an e-mail or web petition; and (g) Forwarded a political e-mail or link to another person.

Offline political participation scale was constructed of eight items (Cronbach's α = 0.89) adapted from previous research (e.g. Bimber 2001; Feezell, Conroy and Guerrero 2009) where respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (where 1 meant 'never' and 5 meant 'very often') whether in the past year they (a) Expressed political opinion through main stream media (written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine or called a live radio or TV show to express a political opinion); (b) Volunteered for a campaign or other political cause; (c) Organized or participated in organizing a political event; (d) Attended political meetings or speeches; (e) Participated in demonstrations or protests; (f) Displayed a political button, a sign or sticker; (g) Voted in election; and (h) Tried to influence how others would vote.

Political efficacy was measured with an additive four items index (Cronbach's α = 0.64) adapted from previous research (Bimber 2001). Respondents were asked to exert to which extent they agreed or disagreed with four items on a five-point scale, where 1 meant 'strongly agree' and 5 meant 'strongly disagree': (a) Politics is too complicated for someone like me to follow; (b) There's not much point in participating in political campaigns – one person's participation will not make any difference; (c) People like me do not have a say in government; and (d) Politicians do not care about what people like me think.

In the 'national' media scepticism section respondents were asked about their perceptions of state-owned media by stating whether they agreed or disagreed with five statements (Tsfati 2003) on a five-point scale, where 1 meant 'strongly disagree' and 5 meant 'strongly agree': (a) National media provide balanced coverage of political issues; (b) News coverage delivered by national media helps solving the problems of the society; (c) I can trust those who run national media institutions in Egypt; (d) National media provide accurate coverage of events; and (e) National media is trustworthy. (Cronbach's α = 0.89).

Fear of authority was the additive measure of three items on five-point scale (Cronbach's α = 0.68), where respondets were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the items: (a) I worry about being emotionally or phisically harrased if I went on street to participate in a political activity; (b) I feel worried about expressing my political opinion in public; and (c) Egyptian citizen could face violations which make him/her worry about his/her safety, where 1 meant 'strongly agree' and 5 meant 'strongly disagree'.

Demographic variables respondents were also asked questions about their gender, age, education and monthly income of the household.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

Data collected for this study went through two stages of analysis. First, analysing the quantitative data yielded from applying the questionnaire instrument. This analysis proceeded in several steps:

1. Frequencies were run on demographics, motivations and contextual factors;
2. Pearson correlation (r) was calculated to answer the second and forth questions. Partial correlation was calculated for each contextual factor to test its mediating impact on the correlation revealed between online and offline participation;
3. Linear regression was conducted to answer the third question.

Online political participation was entered as the dependent block, SNS motivations and motivational antecedents (political efficacy, media scepticism and fear of authority) were entered as the independent block. Second, a preliminary analysis of qualitative data yielded from FGD and in-depth interviews were conducted to support main themes of the research.

RESULTS

Respondent profile

This study examined 367 responses from a self-administered survey assessing the motivations for using social networking sites for political communication. The gender ratio is 39.2% male and 59.4% female ($n = 362$). 64.9% are university students, 24.3% are university graduates and only 8.2% hold higher degrees ($n = 357$). Consistently, more than half fall into the age cohort that range between 18 and 22, while only 4.4% range from 30 to 35 years of age ($n = 362$). 38.1% report a monthly income range between 1000 < 3000 EGP, equal proportions of the respondents (21%) reported that they earn between 3000 < 5000 EGP and 5000 < 7000 EGP, and the least proportion of the respondents falls into the higher income category of more than 7000 EGP ($n = 346$). Respondents were asked to indicate which social networking site(s) they use to communicate with others; Facebook was by far the most visited site (90.9%), followed by YouTube (50.6%); respondents who reported that they use interactive comment section in electronic newspapers (15%) were slightly more than those who used Twitter (12.3%); and blogs were the least popular among respondents (7.3%).

SNS motivations

As Table 1 shows, guidance was the strongest motivation that drove young activists' political use of social networking sites: respondents indicated that they use SNS to decide and form unbiased views on important issues or to guide other users to valuable information ($M = 16.7$; $SD = 3.6$). Acquiring and disseminating information to others followed, with slight difference as respondents mentioned that their use of SNS was driven by the need for surveillance ($M = 16.2$, $SD = 2.4$). Nevertheless, quality of information drew participants to rely more on electronic newspapers compared to social networking sites to acquire accurate reliable information. Past research also found that news gathered from SNS like MySpace, Facebook and YouTube did not add much to the users' political knowledge or to democratic discourse when compared with the impact of using other news sources like cable news

SNS motivation items	Cronbach's α	Factor Score	
I use social networking sites for political communication…		Mean	SD
Factor 1: Guidance	0.76	16.7	3.6
Factor 2: Surveillance	0.68	16.2	2.4
Factor 3: Convenience	0.75	11.8	2.4
Factor 4: Networking	0.67	11.1	2.3
Factor 5: Social utility	0.65	7.7	1.5
Factor 6: Entertainment	0.79	6.5	2.3

Table 1: Social networking sites use motives.

and traditional media (Baumgartner and Morris 2010). Amr Adel, a 35-year-old activist expressed that view:

> I think that Twitter, Facebook, and the like are 'illusory spaces'. They are far from reality compared to electronic newspapers, and hence less effective. People who write on those newspapers are basically writers and journalists; thus, they are politicized and the posted comments and feedback on their work are almost at the same level. But on social networking sites, the situation is chaotic and not goal-directed, which provokes questions about its genuine political value.

Networking motives (M = 11.1; SD = 2.3) receded to the benefit of guidance, information seeking and dissemination and convenience motives as activists expressed their awareness of the limited capacity of social media apparatus to breach the borders of the virtual sphere and enlarge the mobilizing effect to the offline arena. Amr Adel said:

> I think the main problem is that practising politics in Egypt is still immature; this is why people tend to practice 'virtual political activism'. I mean, if there was real political participation, people would not have spent their time chatting. Rather, they will go to the streets and play the role properly. For example, when the Kefaya ('enough') movement first started, there were 1500 registered members online, and I am a member of that movement, but how many were actually on the streets? In fact, you barely find a 150 or 200 protesters in any protest. Many people want to participate, but there are also many limitations and psychological barriers which they try to overcome by participating in the virtual political community.

Political activists who took part in this research were driven the least by entertainment motives (M = 6.47; SD = 2.3). Those result may contradict findings from previous research, which stated that visiting SNS was primarily driven by social interaction needs (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2008), but it should be taken into account that participants in this research are political activists which may readily suggest that their utilization of SNS will be goal-driven to achieve

political aims. This result also delineates how the media environment in the Egyptian society, where traditional media are censored by the government and its reliability is broadly questioned, may have led participants to mistrust 'national' media and turn to the Internet as an alternative (Tsfati 2003; Tsfati and Cappella 2003).

PREDICTORS OF MOTIVATIONS FOR USING SNS
Contextual factors

The relationship between gratifications sought from using the SNS for political purposes and motivational antecedents are the focus of the second question. Respondents' levels of poitical efficacy, media scepticism and fear of authority were correlated with each of the use motivations. Social networking sites motivations have twenty significant correlations out of 42 (Table 2). 'National' media scepticism is the strongest correlate of social networking sites use motivations as shown in Table 2. If individuals are strongly sceptical about state-owned media then it would be expected that their motivations to use social networking sites would increase. This finding is consistent with previous research as individuals tend to seek political information on the Internet when they are not satisfied with mainstream media coverage of political issues (Tolbert and McNeal 2003).

High levels of fear of authority strongly and significantly correlate with using SNS for social utility ($r = .171$, $p < 0.01$), entertainment ($r = .142$, $p < 0.01$) and, to a lesser extent, for convenience reasons ($r = .135$, $p < 0.05$). This may suggest that individuals tend to ease their feelings of fear by 'soft' utilization of SNS as fear was not associated with guidance, surveillance or networking motivations for using SNS.

Motivational antecedents	Use motivations correlates (r)					
	Guidance	Serveillance	Networking	Social utility	Entertain- ment	Convenience
Gender	−0.130*	−0.130*	−0.068	0.144**	0.178**	0.036
Age	0.119*	0.096	0.043	−0.080	−0.120*	−0.009
Education	0.000	0.067	0.017	−0.152**	−0.163**	−0.065
Monthly income	−0.107	−0.168**	−0.116*	−0.129*	0.032	0.072
Political efficacy	0.119*	0.111*	0.072	−0.005	−0.123*	−0.081
Media scepti- cism	0.210**	0.012	0.117*	0.148**	0.170**	0.078
Fear of authority	−0.044	−0.046	0.002	0.171**	0.142**	0.135*

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2: Correlations of SNS use motivations and and motivational antecedents and demographics.

In the same line, correlation analysis revealed significant associations between political efficacy and using SNS for guidance ($r = .119$, $p < 0.05$) and surveillance ($r = .111$, $p < 0.05$). The more SNS users feel politically efficacious the more likely they seek and disseminate political information online. Expectedly, significant and negative association was found between political efficacy and entertainment motivations for using SNS ($r = -.123$, $p < 0.05$).

Demographics

Gender was found to positively correlate to social media motives. There were significant differences in gratifications sought from SNS between males and females as shown from T-test results. Males' use of social media was more driven by guidance and surveillance than females ($p < 0.05$). While females used SNS for social utility and entertainment reasons more than males did ($p < 0.01$), no significant differences were detected for networking and convenience needs.

Monthly income was significantly and negatively related to surveillance ($r = -.168$, $p < 0.01$), and to a lesser extent to networking ($r = -.116$, $p < 0.05$) and social utility ($r = -.129$, $p < 0.05$).

Education is strongly and negatively associated with social utility ($r = -.152$, $p < 0.01$) and entertainment motivations ($r = -.163$, $p < 0.01$) for using SNS for
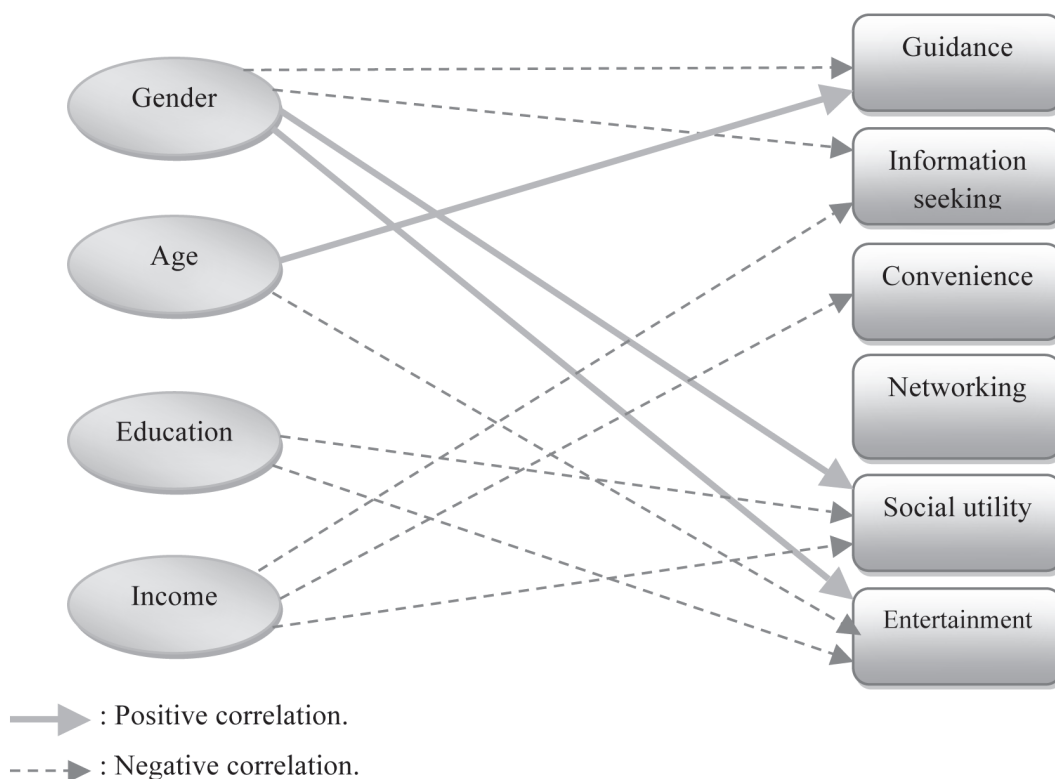

Figure 2: Demographic predictors of activists' social networking sites motivations.

political communication. That is, the higher educated users are less likely to use SNS to gratify social utility and entertainment needs.

Age correlates are the least significant among demographics. It is significantly and positively related to guidance motivations ($r = .119$, $p < 0.05$) and negatively to entertainment motivations ($r = -.120$, $p < 0.05$). Older respondents are more likely to utilize SNS for guidance motivations, while younger respondents are more driven by entertainment needs of using SNS.

Figure 2 illustrates how demographics predict activists' use of social media for political participation:

SNS MOTIVES AND ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Linear regression analysis was used to investigate the way reasons for political use of SNS may relate to online political participation. Using SNS for guidance was not significantly related to practicing politics on those platforms. Recent research showed how Facebook users differentiate between practicing different forms of political activities on the website, as they slightly accept expressing political opinions on Facebook, but perceive the medium as being inappropriate for attempting to persuade others to change or embrace political beliefs or activities (Vitak et al. 2009). Low cost (money, effort and time) was found irrelevant to practicing politics online, which may imply that young activists are willing to devote their time and effort to achieve their goals via practicing political activities on SNS.

Using SNS for political information was significantly related to practicing politics online; that is, the more young activists were driven by surveillance, the more they use SNS for political communication ($\beta = 0.227$, $P < 0.01$). The more young activists were motivated by networking and making friends, the more they used SNS for political communication ($\beta = 0.291$, $P < 0.01$). This finding is typically consistent with the nature of SNS as a platform for maintaining already established relationships and less broadly for fostering new ones (Boyd and Ellison 2007), but it also reflects their desire of enlarging the size of their network of acquaintances as a prerequisite for mobilizing others, as suggested in recent research (Shen et al. 2009). The more activists were driven by social utility motives, the less they practiced political communication online ($\beta = -0.207$, $P < 0.01$); and the more they sought entertainment, the less they participated in politics via SNS ($\beta = -0.125$, $P < 0.05$).

ONLINE AND OFFLINE PARTICIPATION

Practicing politics on SNS was constantly related to engaging in political activities offline ($r = .601$, $P < 0.01$); activists who practice political activities on social networking sites tend to be more inclined to practice politics offline. This correlation was persistent even when mediated by fear of authority ($r = .576$, $p < 0.01$), which was expected to detach media users from bridging their activism to the offline arena, where they may face several forms of repression and harassment. It is argued that opinion expression in one scenario is positively related to expression in other scenarios, and expressing opinion online will increase possibilities to express it in reality (W. S. Fahmi 2009). The correlation also holds strong when mediated by media scepticism ($r = .611$, $p < 0.01$) and political efficacy ($r = .561$, $p < 0.01$).

One interesting explanation of the revealed correlation is that online participation is not in and of itself sufficient for achieving the aspired change. This explanation could hold strong especially when taking into consideration

that participants in the current research are activists who are already interested in politics and are expected to be more inclined to engage in offline politics than their fellow citizens. Mohamed El-Dakhakhny, a 23-year-old male activist blogger, expressed the significance of offline politics to achieve change:

> Social media is not sufficient in itself and people should not use Facebook as an alternative to offline participation. It should rather be used as means to mobilize as much people as possible to go offline. And I think that collective actions that succeeded recently like the April 6 movement started on Facebook. The problem is to limit participation to the Internet arena.

DISCUSSION

This article intended to explore whether young activists tend to utilize social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to challenge concentration of power and practice active role in politics under authoritarian regimes. Much discussion of new media originates in developed countries, and is mistakenly dealing with media as a homogenous entity called 'today's global media environment' assuming that issues 'facing the media industry worldwide' were equally universal (Berger 2007: 3). Additionally, the potential role of the Internet in the process of social and political transformation has been also broadly discussed in western societies where 'individualism and representative democracy are the main cultural and institutional ingredients' (Shen et al. 2009: 453). Therefore, it is beneficial to explore the potential social media might have in other societies where history and present imply repressive reactions in response to deviation from the 'preservation of the state' path as defined by the governing regime.

The current study revealed that practicing political communication on SNS strongly and positively feeds into active political participation offline. Young Egyptian activists were found to be highly inclined to engage in politics offline, and their online/offline activism was strongly correlated even when mediated by political efficacy, media scepticism and, most importantly, fear of authority. This finding lines the current research with previous work that supported Internet potential for democratic mobilization (Boulianne 2009). The open prison which Egyptians are currently living in – where they are denied the most basic rights (Tisdall 2011), where emergency laws are enforced by secret policemen and informers, where there is detention without trial, political opponents are harassed and tortured, there are frequent executions and mass jailing of Islamists for allegedly threatening the state, draconian curbs on freedom of expression and the press and, most recently, the censoring or blocking of the Internet and social media – fear of authority was expected to have a negative impact on youth inclination to take their activism offline, yet the results of the current research proved the opposite to be true. Ahmed Maher, a 30-year-old male activist, shares his experience with authorities and discusses how the fear barrier was broken:

> I was arrested more than once in demonstrations and it caused no problem to me. The problem was at the first time. I mean the barrier was broken, and then many barriers fell apart. This creates a status especially that I haven't been treated violently. This breach of fear makes the whole difference. I think we all need to breach the barriers.

But before jumping to enthusiastic conclusions, and making 'activists' daydreams about ordinary citizens using SNSs for political actions and speaking truth to power' (Boyd 2008a) come true, results of the current research should be interpreted with respect to two aspects: first, the study was conducted on a snowball sample of young activists. This implies that respondents could be highly interested in politics, as well as having strong feelings of efficacy. The age cohort of the sample also raises possibilities that participants are highly efficient in using the Internet, which was found by previous research to be strongly related to participating in politics online (Shen et al. 2009). Additionally, limitations of generalizing results from a non-probability sample should be taken into account.

Second, the interval period between 'the most fraudulent parliamentary elections' (Tisdall 2011) and the 25 January revolt, during which the field research took place, is expected to be marked by vigorous political activism both on and offline to mobilize the public behind demands of reform. Projection of this vibrant activism is expected to reflect on the research findings.

It also worth mentioning that although the explosion of the revolt may support the revealed correlation and even lead to exaggerations about a 'Facebook or Twitter revolution', interpreting the findings of the current research with respect to the climate of 25 January revolt may shed light on several factors that may have operated to push the demonstrations to the revolutionary threshold, and may also help situating SNS realistically among those factors rather than regarding social media *the* causative factor in sparking off the revolt. Cutting off the Internet after only three days of taking to the streets (Anon 2011c) may have allowed a room for trust-based networking mechanisms through face-to-face communication, which the Internet was blamed for undermining since it joined the mainstream more than a decade ago (Robert Kraut 1998; Zhang et al. 2010). Protesters have also managed to create a 'Friday theme' and mobilize a series of massive protests, the largest of which were held on Fridays. Each Friday was flagged by a certain demand to spell out people's reaction to the regime or to announce the next step in the revolt (i.e. Friday of Rage, Friday of Departure, Friday of Cleanliness, etc.). Building on Ottaway and Hamzawy's (2011) protest movement assessment in the Arab region, it could be said that this theme helped protesters conducting a number of connected episodes, which built on each other to provide a form of organization for a cohesive movement.

Protesters have also managed to utilize 'old' media to circumvent the censorship of the Internet and pro-revolution broadcasters (like Al Jazeera TV), and create hybrid technological solutions which enabled what Castells called 'flash mobilization' (Castells et al. 2007: 200) to voice Egyptians discontent with the regime, and help to portray a reliable picture of the revolt.

Additionally, the fear factor, although expected to work against participation, especially in unconventional forms of engagement, has nevertheless worked in favour of the revolt. Fear of detention and torture may have made protesters more persistent on maintaining the momentum of the revolt. Their faces were on independent and private satellite TV screens, and their names and addresses were well-known to authorities; online activists were no longer 'avatars'. Protesters felt that there is no turning back; it is either they take their movement up to the end and topple the regime or die in Tahrir Square.

On the other side of the picture is the 'national media' coverage of the revolt accompanied with the regime's reaction to the protests and protesters. The 'bunch of kids' approach led the embattled government to slip into a

series of misconducts and violations of civil rights overarched by negligence and provocative late official announcements. This might have drawn protesters to become more persistent and even to widen their scope of demands for ousting the president to the limit.

This contextual realistic view of media impact was also depicted in activists' views of social media potential for mobilization as expressed in the focus group discussions that were conducted on the qualitative trajectory of the current research. They discussed the difference between the numbers of online participants and political group members and the relatively moderate numbers of people who took to the streets in previous demonstrations and protests. They also mentioned some of the reasons why people may tend to participate more in the online context, where they might be motivated by convenience. Practicing politics online was found to be less money, less effort and less time consuming, let alone being safer and lees likely to be traced or monitored.

Being guided by assumptions of the uses and gratifications approach, this research serves as a first circle in the chain of the Arab uprisings evolving studies. It helps shedding light at the individual level of social media utilization for political participation during a critical moment of the Egyptian history – as it captures activists' perceptions of the potential of social media for democratic engagement in the vibrant period that preceded the 25 January uprisings. Accordingly, further analysis and collective approaches are needed to shed more light on the spread and scale of the massive demonstrations and the mechanisms that transferred them to a revolt. As the revolt of 25 January did not happen overnight, it might also worth revisiting and embracing ideas of class and identity-building as a conceptual framework to scrutinize and analyze the role strikes and workers' protests played in setting an example and building a momentum for the revolt.

CONCLUSION

The current research builds on the assumption that the features of new media and the opportunities they offer, combined with personal attributes, along with the nature of the political and social context in the Egyptian society – where mainstream media is dominated by the government and political engagement is monitored and burdened with restricting conditions – might all incentivize young adults to make use of those opportunities to get involved in their society in order to achieve social and political change. By applying themes derived from the uses and gratifications approach, especially those related to notions of active audience and motivational-driven media consumption, this study aimed at testing suggested relations between motivational, political, media-related and psychological variables in order to answer questions related to activists' views of social media as apparatus for mobilization.

A mixed-method approach was deployed to answer the research questions. Through analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data that yielded from surveying 367 activists, then followed by interviewing three groups of activists, the study revealed that activists' political consumption of social media was mainly drawn by guidance as their use of social media platforms was motivated the most by helping them decide on political issues, as well as helping others making political decisions. Practicing politics on social media platforms was positively associated with engaging in forms of

political participation offline; a finding that may belong to the optimistic school of thought on social media contributions to democratic engagement, but nevertheless analyzed with respect to contextual considerations and mechanisms that vary a lot from those operating in western societies and well-established democracies where most previous research on the issue was conducted.

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