

A Research on Social and Political Use of Social Media in Turkey

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Abstract

Social media, generated by advances in internet technology, are heavily used by individuals of every age and every class both in Turkey and all over the world. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ make virtual societies possible, and enable ideas, opinions and comments to be shared. This sharing of visual and auditory context without any limitations has produced a more democratic platform. The democratic structure specific to social media enables them to be used for social and political purposes. In this study, a research is conducted on social/political use of social media in Turkey. Results of the research revealed that majority of the participants (46.6%) spend 2 to 4 hours on social media and 75.6% of the participants use smart phones for social media access. 11.2% of participants stated that they use social media for political and social purposes. 78.9% of the participants use Twitter and Facebook for political/social information sharing. 67.7% of participants frequently use Twitter for political/social purposes. In terms of political issues, participants prefer to use social media for domestic affairs rather than international affairs. The most controversial result was about the participants' pessimistic attitude towards social media. Some part of the participants think that social media will not change anything in Turkey, and the other part states that social media usage will divide up the society. Detailed analyses are given throughout the article.

Key Words: Social Media, Social Movements, Democratic Participation, Content Sharing, Molding Public Opinion.

Türkiye'de Sosyal Medyanın Toplumsal ve Siyasal Kullanımı Üzerine Bir Araştırma

Özet

İnternet teknolojisinin gelişim göstermesiyle hayat bulan sosyal medya gerek Türkiye’de gerekse de dünyada her yaştan her kesimden birey tarafından yoğun bir şekilde kullanılmaktadır. Facebook, Twitter, Google+...vb. gibi sosyal paylaşım ağları insanların sanal topluluklar oluşturmasına olanak vermekte, fikir, görüş ve düşüncelerin paylaşılmasını sağlamaktadır. Görsel, işitsel içeriklerin herhangi bir engelle karşılaşmadan paylaşılabilmesi sosyal medyanın daha demokratik bir yapıya sahip olmasını sağlamıştır. Sosyal medyanın daha demokratik bir yapıya sahip olması, bu ağların toplumsal ve politik amaçlı kullanılabilmesini mümkün kılmıştır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye’de sosyal medyanın toplumsal/politik amaçlı kullanımı araştırılmıştır. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu (%46.6) sosyal medyada günde 2-4 saat vakit geçirmekte ve bu kullanıcıların %75.6’sı sosyal medya erişimi için akıllı telefon kullanmaktadır. Sosyal medyayı politik ve toplumsal amaçlar için kullandığını ifade eden katılımcı oranı ise %11.2’dir. Bu politik/toplumsal bilgi paylaşımının 78.9’u Facebook ve Twitter üzerinden gerçekleşmektedir. Katılımcıların %67.7’si Twitter’ı sıklıkla politik/sosyal amaçlar için kullanmaktadır. Kullanıcıların sosyal medyayı politik amaçlı kullanımı uluslararası politikaya nazaran iç politikada daha yoğundur. Araştırmanın en şaşırtıcı sonucu ise katılımcıların sosyal medya hakkındaki karamsar kanaatleridir. Katılımcıların bir kısmı sosyal medyanın Türkiye’de hiçbir şeyi değiştiremeyeceğine inanırken diğer bir kısmı sosyal medyanın toplumu böyleceğine inanmaktadır. Analizler makale içerisinde detaylandırılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Toplumsal Hareketler, Demokratik Katılım, İçerik Paylaşımı, Kamuoyu Oluşturma

1. Introduction

New communication media have begun to emerge with the birth and growth of internet technology. Interaction phenomenon, which interchanged the roles of source and receiver, constructed the basis structure of Web 2.0. Close correlation between internet technology and digital technologies extended the coverage of new media, and caused social networking sites to become prominent. Investment in social media is becoming higher and higher both in Turkey and all over the world; and number of active users are increasing accordingly. Social media with its unique framework attracts individuals and makes them social media addicts. Involvement of individuals from all classes of society without any distinctions such as income level, age and sex, indicates a more liberal environment provided by social media.

Social media have caused considerable changes in communication field, and had revolutionary implications for social structure. Its democratic structure has also enabled promotion of different ideas and expression of opinions. Besides, liberal use of social media has made users able to share all the content they want. Individuals are able to use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google+ for such purposes. A social medium including divergent views would have social and political importance. It can be observed clearly that, just like all the rest of the world, social networking sites are used for social and political purposes also in Turkey, since social media have the ability of agenda setting.

In this study, political and social uses of social media in Turkey are examined. The quantitative method of “Survey Technique” is used during the research. Individual opinions about social media are sought, and the importance of social networking sites in terms of social and political issues is emphasized. Reasonable suggestions on social/political use of social media are provided in the light of findings.

2. An Overview of Social Media Term

In today’s world, social media are an essential part of our lives. Social networking sites, having various fields of use, attract individuals of all ages and all classes. Rheingold defines social media as “social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (Tektaş, 2014: 853). A social networking site is also defined to be an interactive medium, developed to establish communities, enable sharing and foster collaboration.

Various definitions of social media are possible. They are social platforms on which users share their knowledge, experiences and interests through the Internet or mobile systems. Check in, chat rooms, discussion boards, electronic guides, blogs, podcasts and video sharing sites are parts of social media. Besides interpersonal communication, it enables mass communication as well. It provides both an information exchange between two individual sources and a flow of information from a single source to a number of other sources.

Social media are the most important and the most fundamental benefit of second generation web technologies. Through this technology of Web 2.0, as it is called, one-sided information flow has been replaced with two-sided one, and interaction phenomenon has occurred at its highest level. Social networking sites, continuing to be heavily used throughout the world, allow users to propose different ideas and express conflicting opinions freely. In addition,

rapid advances in technology have enabled richer social media content, and made it possible for users to share visual and auditory content easily. As a matter of fact, today contents such as videos, movies, music clips, cartoons and photographs can be shared through social media (Özkaşıkçı, 2012: 28).

2.1. Basic Components of Social Media

Being a product of new generation communication technologies and using internet technology infrastructure, social media have their own components. Mayfield identifies five main components of social media (Mayfield, 2008: 6):

- **Participants:** Participants are the most basic component of social media. It is impossible to share and interact without the existence of participants, or users as it is named. Participants are encouraged in social media, and they get feedback about their posts.
- **Community:** Social media enables communities to be formed easily and effectively. Members of these communities, called social groups, can interchange any content like photos or music tracks without facing any limitations.
- **Connectedness:** The most important benefit of social media is the ability to give links to other web sites. Meanly, one can give a link relating to a news item, a research or an analysis through a social media web site.
- **Conversation:** While in traditional media only one-sided content flow was possible, social media enable two-sided or multiple-sided flow of information. Not only objects can be delivered as web content but also electronic text delivery is possible.
- **Openness:** Social media services are open to direct feedback or interaction. Via these services, users can comment on each other's posts or share content without any need for an intermediate tool or an agent. In certain cases, some access limitations may exist. These limitations, however, are put on mostly by the users who share the content.

2.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media

Social media with its broad influence area have the potential to bring people from all over the world together. However, both advantages and disadvantages of social media exist. Although each social networking site has its own structure, main advantages of social media can be listed as follows (Tesorero, 2014):

- Social networking sites may be used for business purposes.
- It is possible to remain online with no charge.
- It is very easy to create special-interest groups in social media.
- Cross-border collaborations are possible.
- Online participation is more practical than physical participation.
- New updates and important data can be shared simultaneously.
- Demographic data about users can be collected since social media is also used by companies.
- Physical boundaries are removed.

- It is possible to gather information in almost every subject using social networking sites.
- Social networking sites also enable cross-cultural communication.

There are disadvantages of social networking sites as well. The most significant of all is “identity theft”. Another major problem is the risk of fraud. Endless speculations exist among social media users, and the accuracy of the information cannot be proven. Some messages spread over social networking sites may serve commercial purposes. It is fairly hard to measure participation in, and addiction to social media. Similarly, it is very hard to control user attitudes on social media.

3. Social/Political Use of Social Media in Turkey

It is claimed that social networking sites change human relationships and strengthen interpersonal relations. The study by Cambie and Ooi revealed that social networking sites foster human relationships in the real world. According to results of the same study, social networking sites enable new friendships to be established. It is a fact that friendships developed in virtual world are possibly maintained in real world, and in that way users have a new social environment. Interaction level has been accelerated by increasing number of users, and this high interaction caused individuals to have a sense of belonging. An individual who becomes a member of a group or a web site, adopts the group’s identity over time, and begins to behave in the same manner as the group (Güçdemir, 2010: 54). Users can share their newly gained knowledge with other users through social networking sites. By this way, two-sided or multiple-sided information flow becomes possible. The possibility of an interactive communication has led to social/political use of social media.

Social media have also become alternative platforms of communication. Any news item, content or image that is not appeared in traditional media can be shared in social media. Thus, public opinion can be molded; and social movements can be launched through organizing people in social media. People, called social media activists, can organize the society, which results in social movements to move from virtual environment to real world. As Bennett emphasized in his study of (2003: 144), through digital communication applications, activism is moved to a different level, and individual participation is replaced with collective participation over time. Social campaigns and movements can be started over social media, and various practices can be employed to reach specific goals.

Among the social/political movements started through social media the most prominent ones are the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street –the movement started in September 17, 2011, in New York City’s Wall Street financial district, to protest social inequality and influence of cooperation’s on US government – movements. In the case of Turkey, social media is used extensively during Taksim Gezi Park protests held in 2013. Originally, some activists carried out sit-in at the park protesting the urban development plan of the government, which involves the removal of some trees to pedestrianize Taksim Square, and rebuilding of Ottoman-era Military Barracks. Upon the police eviction of the sit-in protesters, protests turned into an act of disobedience. Subsequently, totally anti-government protests began to take place, and spread through other major cities like Ankara, İzmir, Bursa and Eskişehir as well as through Istanbul. Protests reached an utmost level especially in social media through the photos and videos shared by users (Gündüz, 2013: 147-148). Labels like “Occupy Gezi” and “Diren (Resist) Gezi” created in social media enabled masses to meet, organize and move

together. Soma mine disaster, happened in May 13, 2014, in Soma district of Manisa city, is another event which proved the fact that information flow through social media was also rapid in Turkey. The death of 301 workers resulted from an accident in power unit of the mine, remained in Turkish agenda for weeks and a three-day-mourning was held. The event drew considerable attention in lots of social networking sites especially on Facebook and Twitter, and numerous visual contents were shared via user accounts. In addition, diverse campaigns and social activities were organized through social media, and hash-tags like #KazaDeğilCinayet, #İşkazasıdeğilcinayet, #SOMAUNUTULMAMALI, #GünKömürKarası, #KaderDeğilCinayeti were widely used in social networking sites.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Instrument

The primary objective of this article is to find out the social and political usage of social media in Turkey. Data for this research was collected through a questionnaire. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Turkish by a research assistant, proficient in both English and Turkish. The translated Turkish questionnaire was further verified by the three authors of this paper.

The survey was conducted as a web-based survey, and it comprises 18 questions which are divided into different segments.

Questions number 1, 2, 3 and 4 focused on demographic information of the participants such as sex, age, educational background, and monthly income.

Questions number 5,6,7,9 and 10 were questions about electronic devices which are used by participants in order to access social media as well as internet connection, internet connection type and amount of time they spent on social media for the purpose of retrieving and sharing information.

Question 11 asked how often participants use social media to gain and share social and political information. A 5-point Likert scale ([1] always – [5] never) was used.

Questions 8, 12 and 14 were used to identify social media popular sites. Multiple-choice questions regarding social media sites participants are using for social and political purposes aimed to explore users' preferences. These preferences include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, Blogs, and also participants had the opportunity to suggest other not-listed sites.

Question 13 asked what motivates the participants to use social media for social and political information. A 5-Point Likert scale was used with different statements derived from past studies on uses and gratifications (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Kaye, 1998; Mcleod& Becker, 1981, 1974). Participants indicated their level of agreement with the reasons for accessing social media. Possible responses ranged from “[1] strongly disagree” to “[5] strongly agree”.

Question 15 addressed participants' level of involvement on social media. Participants were asked to specify their level of involvement in a given series of social and political issues on a frequency-scale of [1] never to [5] always.

In question 16, participants were asked about influences regarding their adoption of social media for political and social use.

Question 17 focused on major issues that Turkish people often engage in discussion on social media. A frequencies scale ([1] never – [5] always) was used for a series of issues in Turkey such as political, social, economic, international events, corruptions, unemployment, and entertainment.

Finally, question 18 addressed the participants’ perception of using social media for social and political purposes. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on statements that addressed the effect of social media on Turkish society and development issues, the perspectives of roles and expectations, and the government reaction toward this role of social media.

4.2. Sampling and data collection

Data for the study was collected from Turkish social media users. During a two-week period, 180 respondents completed the survey. After duplicate submissions were sorted and removed, and 20 respondents who indicated their age as being under 18 were also excluded, a net sample of 160 usable questionnaires remained. A total of 84 (52.2%) of the participants were female and 76 (47.2%) were male. Majority of the participants (126 or 78.3%) were social media users who hold a bachelor’s degree. Demographic data also showed that 128 (%80) respondents are making 1500\$ and less. Data obtained from questionnaires were analyzed through the IBM SPSS statistical software.

5. Analysis

5.1. Uses and gratifications

Results show a high percentage of respondents (46.6%) to spend between 2 to 4 hours per day on social media. When examining the devices used for social media, the majority of the sample reported using social media sites on smart phones (75.6%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants using social media

	Frequency	Percent
<i>By time spend</i>		
2-4 hour	44	30.1
Less than 2 hour	68	46.6
4-6 hour	18	12.3
6-8 hour	8	5
More than 8 Hour	8	5
<i>By using device</i>		
Smart phone	121	75.6
Laptop	107	66.9
Tablet	37	23.1
Desktop	52	32.5

Respondents were very likely to use social media for political and social purposes. A high percentage of people (32.3%) generally use social media while 29.8% of them use it sometimes; and 11.2 percent always use social media for political and social purposes. Participants identify their motivations of using social media for political and social information as being a helpful tool that provide the information they need (see Table 2). The most common (Mean= 2.78) motivation for people to use social media is to gain political and social information that can be hold against in arguments with others.

Table 2. Respondents' motivations of using social media for political and social information

	Mean	Standard Deviation
because information is easy to obtain	1.48	0.64
to get the news faster	1.37	0.57
to find specific political/social information I am looking for	1.86	0.91
to keep up with the main issues of the day	1.48	0.60
to help me decide about important things	2.71	1.08
because it is entertaining	1.98	0.87
because it is exciting	2.70	1.10
to see what an official is doing in his/her position	2.41	0.99
to judge personal qualities of officials for unbiased viewpoints	2.50	0.98
to give me something to talk about with others	2.16	1.04
to hold against in arguments with others	2.78	1.18
because it help me relax	2.69	1.14
to satisfy my curiosity	1.78	0.76

5.2. Social Media site usage and level of involvement

Twitter and Facebook are the most popular social media sites that respondents have active account in (78.9%), and these sites are followed by YouTube (52.8%). On the other hand, active account percentage for Instagram is (47.2%) and LinkedIn is (31.7%). Similarly, Twitter is the most popular site that a majority of participants use for political and social information (67.7%), which is followed by Facebook (50.3%). When it comes to political and social discussions, Twitter is still the top social media site for respondents to use.

Table 3. Participants by level of involvement on social media

	Mean	Standard Deviation
keep up with society news	1.79	0.83
Share links to political stories or articles for others to read	2.42	1.11
Post my own thought or comments on political or social issues	2.20	1.03
Encourage other people to take action on political/social issues that is important to me	2.27	1.07
Share content related to political/ social issues that was originally posted by someone else	2.71	1.13
“Like/Favorite” material related to political/social issues that other have posted	2.36	0.94
Debating or discussing social/political issues with others	2.62	1.18
Recruit people to get involved in social issues that matter to them	2.92	1.23
finding other people who share their views about important social/ political issues	2.87	1.15

Participant mostly use social media to recruit people to be involved in social issues that matter to them (see Table 3).

5.3. The most commonly participated social media issues in Turkey

Table 4. Substantial issues that participants engage in discussions in social media.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Political issues	2.87	1.27
Social issues	2.32	1.10
Economic issues	3.16	1.09
International events	2.76	1.10
Censorship	2.69	1.25
Corruption	2.71	1.30
Unemployment	2.84	1.28
Entertainment	2.70	1.19
Sports	3.31	1.34
Shopping	4.05	1.24

When one examined the issues which subjects interact with other users most often (see Table 4), shopping and sports are the most popular issues in social media. Economic issues that the participants engage in discussions in social media have almost the same average.

Table 5. Social/Political incidents which increase social media usage.

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Wikileaks</i>	40	24.8
<i>ArapSpring</i>	43	26.7
<i>Egypt</i>	40	24.8
<i>Syria</i>	40	24.8
<i>Gezi</i>	117	72.7
<i>17 December</i>	81	50.3
<i>30 March</i>	77	48.1

As shown in Table 5, according to participants, the increase in social media usage about social/political issues resulted from the interest in domestic incidents rather than incidents that occur in overseas. For example, during Gezi Park incident, the usage of social media among participants was 72.7% and it takes the first place on the table.

Table 6. Social media in Turkey

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Can lead the society to change positively	2.54	1.05
Help people understand social/political issues	2.37	1.04
Change the way people deal with the government	2.59	1.10
Change the way government deals with the people	2.68	1.27
Is the best place to discuss social/political issues	2.86	1.08
Is just new technology that people are impressed with	2.80	1.17
Seeks to divide up the society	3.89	1.11
Push government to make more changes and improvement	2.87	1.13
Encourage social movements in human rights	2.07	0.84
Encourage social movements in political reforms	2.25	0.93
Encourage social movements against corruption	2.39	1.06
Encourage social movements in economic improvement	2.57	1.08
Show officials care about what is going on social media	2.37	1.02
Force officials to do their job better	2.61	1.08
Will not change anything	3.90	1.18

As shown in Table 6, a significant part of the participants believes that social media will not change anything in Turkey and the other part believes that many social media users try to divide up the society.

6. Conclusion

Online social networks are still developing and becoming the fabric of our daily life (Mayer, 2009). Today's world is under the domination of technologies such as mobile technologies, which allow people to communicate with each other ubiquitously. Therefore, new communication methods spread the news and ideas faster than ever. As a result of this, peoples' attitudes and understandings towards social and political issues are changing rapidly.

This research focuses on the importance of social networking sites where people exchange information and identify themselves in novel ways. It emphasizes the overall understanding of the role of the social media usage on political/social information exchange on the sites.

This study, using data collection of 180 people, over 18 of which were from Turkey, considered the effects of some factors on young people's social media usage. In this article, based on the studies of Rheingold, Cambie, Ooi, and Bennett, theoretical point of view, social network sites and their usage on political/social issues of people were examined. Some of the produced results of multivariable analysis of this study confirm the theories about the social media and social networks.

According to the findings of this research, there is no significant difference between males and females on social network usage about political/social issues. Results indicate that, most of the respondents use social media 2-4 hours a day, and majority of them use smart phones for their social media involvement activities. It was found out that respondents mostly use social media for political /social information exchange. This finding is consistent with Rheingold's definition of social media. The other important finding is about the usage of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. A vast majority of respondents stated that via Twitter and Facebook people encourage each other to involve in social issues.

Social media usage has a different story in Turkey. Participants stated that shopping, sports and economic issues have the priority for the social media usage in Turkey. After Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former prime minister of Turkey, declared Twitter and Youtube the number one public enemy right after Gezi Park incidents, social media usage, especially Twitter, increased dramatically in Turkey. Most of the Turkish people preferred to use social media for the domestic incidents rather than the overseas incidents.

Most of the respondents stated that social media is not that powerful or influential in Turkey and the usage of social media will not change anything in terms of social and political issues. Some of the respondents believe that social media will divide up the society into different idea groups. According to that finding, there is a high correlation between statements using social media for shopping purposes and social media will not change anything in the country. According to findings of this research, there is an important question to be asked: "How should we encourage people to use social media for more change?"

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