Understanding the Factors that Hinder Online Civic Participation

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Abstract

Online medium brings new opportunities to civic participation and activism. In many countries, users adopt online messengers when staging protests and expressing their freedom of speech. While important, the literature has not delved into the factors that hinder online civic participation. In this study, we propose a model to examine factors that hinder online user participation in civic activism and investigates the underlying mechanisms of the hindrance. This model is grounded on Integrated Threat Theory and Technology Threat Avoidance Theory. We plan to use a mixed-method approach which includes a qualitative interview and a quantitative survey to test the research model.

Keywords

Tracking Policy, User Protection Technology, Online Civic Participation, Perceived Threats

Introduction

During the Bersih (Clean) anti-corruption movement in Malaysia in 2015, a mobile messaging application called FireChat was markedly adopted by the organizers and demonstrators. Unlike most of the messaging apps, FireChat does not require an Internet connection and erects a mesh network that allows users to connect directly to each other via Bluetooth or Wi-Fi in addition to mobile phone networks. In South Korea, the government’s regular monitoring and reading of individuals’ chatting logs from the local mobile messenger Kakaotalk pushes many to move to Telegram, a Russian-based mobile messenger because it could not be monitored by government agencies. Recently, Iranian demonstrators also used Telegram to communicate with each other which resulted in the government officially blocking Telegram in the country. However, people still using it through VPN (Virtual Private Network). FireChat and Telegram are interesting cases of massive use of mesh mobile networks and encrypted network services for civic activism and movements. In fact, these messengers have been used in many countries for freedom of speech.

The literature shows that online medium brings new opportunities to civic participation and activism. Its nature and traits such as anonymity and invisibility give a preferable environment for individuals to freely express their opinion (Kling et al., 1999). Accordingly, online medium has revived the social and public ground, where individuals and public actions gather together to become more collective and stronger. Social network services and media also increase the diffusibility and extensive publicity of civic participation by bridging and bonding people (Gustafsson, 2012). However, little research has been conducted to delve into factors related to online civic participation.

In respect to the technology-mediated user participation, researchers have applied and developed various IT adoption models such as Technology Acceptance Model to predict and explain user acceptance of a new IT and to ultimately understand civic participation. These studies focused on finding the factors that explain why users choose to use technological service or medium for civic engagement (Davis, 1993). Other scholars such as Walter and Lopez (2008) tried to theorize the negative effect of the perceived threat of physicians
on their acceptance of IT systems. However, there is still a lack of theorizing regarding the factors that affect
users to choose not to use online medium or services particularly when it involves government’s online
surveillance policy for online civic engagement and participation. Also, there is a lack of research regarding
the effect of user protection technology on citizens’ perception of the threat and their privacy concern.

Based on the limitations and the gaps in the existing approaches in understanding why people decide not
to engage in online civic participation, this study examines external factors that hinder online user
participation in digital activism and investigates the underlying mechanisms of the hindrance. Specifically,
we study the effect of external surveillance policy, technological protection support, and their interactions.
Different types of potential perceived threats of online civic participation will be explored and tested to
explain how these external factors affect user participation.

Literature Review

Online Civic Participation

The Internet has expanded the opportunities for social engagement and participation. Earlier studies
argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) reduces social cues and creates a more
individualistic environment (Jessup et al., 1990). However, more recent studies showed that behavior in
anonymous and isolated CMC can be of more normative and social influence. Research has also shown that
there can be a strong social attraction to the groups in CMC. (Lea et al., 2001). In addition, the
characteristics of online environment such as dissociative anonymity and invisibility motivate people to
express their opinion and engage in social movements that they would not do in offline face-to-face settings.
Particularly, a number of civic activism practices including Arab Spring, the Tunisian and Egyptian
revolution, have witnessed that the protesters and opinion leaders actively used social media to distribute
information, raise awareness, and make more people engage at the rally (Hermida et al., 2014). In many
ways, online and mobile media have offered users a chance to engage in, participate in, organize, and unite
in more sophisticated and powerful ways (Gelbaudo, 2018).

Online Surveillance Policy

Research has reported how online surveillance policy hinders online civic engagement and participation.
Governments’ Internet censorship is especially obtrusive during socially and politically unstable times
(Widener, 2016). Internet censorship was described as “wary of the social impact that can be caused by
mass sentiments and magnified by the wide reach of the Internet, the state regulators actively close sites
and delete online texts when they sense potential political unrest. During the Arab Spring movements in
early 2011, the state censorship machines in certain countries worked diligently to nip any trace of anti-
government sentiment in the bud (Wu, 2014, p. 107).” As seen in the cases above, the result of government
censorship and surveillance decreases online users’ willingness to participate in social and civic movements.
Surveillance and censorship diminish the effect of online medium and CMC, thus increase potential and
perceived risks of the users.

User Protection Technology

There are a few technology and services that are aimed at user privacy and right for freedom of expression,
thus to protect users. Anonymity and pseudonymity offer users a huge sense of protection, though in reality
it can be tracked. Many services including Yik Yak and FireChat are following anonymity or pseudonymity
policy. Encrypted messaging is that no third parties can access the decrypted content without access to one
of the end devices by definition. Telegram got popular by including self-destructing messages and heavy
encryption. Mesh networking is a type of Internet connection that is hard to dominate. Instead of using
certain huge centralized hubs, mesh networking allows users to connect directly to each other. Thus,
essentially, the communication does not need ‘the Internet,’ by connecting the communicators directly
through their phone’s Wi-Fi- or Bluetooth. Firechat got its popularity with this networking technology
during the Bersih movement.
**Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) and Technology Threat Avoidance Theory (TTAT)**

The importance of perceived anxiety and threats has been studied for the attempt to capture the role of anxiety in intergroup relations. When considering digital activism of community as an action and conflict between the community and the entity causing issues, the theories for understanding intergroup relations and conflicts suit to apply in our context. The integrated threat theory (ITT) is developed based on the basic role of perceived threats, which is the feeling of unease, tense, worried or apprehensive about what might happen. In the ITT, the perceived threat is used to predict behavioral intentions towards an outgroup, including both evaluative reactions and explicit actions. In addition, ITT contends that the degree of perceived threats depends on antecedents such as prior conflict, knowledge of the outgroup, group member’s personalities and the nature of the communication (Stephan et al., 1999).

Technology threat avoidance theory (Walter & Lopez, 2008) is developed to explain individual IT user’s threat avoidance behavior. The theory posits that users’ IT threat avoidance is represented by a dynamic positive feedback loop that intends to enlarge the discrepancy between the current state and the undesired end state. The bases of the theories are coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and risk analysis (Baskerville, 1991). The coping theory explains that users go through two cognitive processes, threat appraisal and coping appraisal, supporting that users will change their behavioral decision when they feel threats or anxiety. Risk analysis literature elaborates users’ threat perception is determined by the perceived probability of the threat’s occurrence and perceived the severity of the threat’s negative consequences, proposing perceived risk and threat as critical criteria in the behavioral decision-making process.

**Research Model and Hypotheses**

Based on the theories and previous research, our research model and hypotheses are shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Research Model](image)

**Perceived Threat**

Perceived threat refers to “the perception of a dangerous situation” (Marakas & Hornik, 1996). In this study, perceived threats are related to intergroup anxiety that people perceive when they integrate with others in a certain situation or environment (Stephan et al. 1999). In ITT, four threats are proposed: realistic threat, symbolic threat, relational threat, and negative stereotypes. We omit negative stereotypes in our study because this threat is not related to tracking policy; rather it is related to the perception among the members (Stephan et al., 1999).

H1 Tracking policy will increase perceived threat

H1a Anonymity in the online platform will reduce the effect of tracking policy on perceived threats

H1b Distributed network in the online platform will reduce the effect of tracking policy on perceived threats
Privacy Concern

Privacy is “the right to be let alone” (Warren & Brandeis, 1890, p. 195). Privacy classifications include the privacy of a person, privacy of personal behavior, the privacy of personal communication, and privacy of personal data. Researchers have examined physical privacy, interactional privacy, psychological privacy, and informational privacy (Paine et al., 2007). Information privacy concerns exist when an individual feels threatened by a perceived unfair loss of control over their privacy by an information-collecting body. Information privacy concerns are also stated as “an individual’s subjective views of fairness within the context of information privacy” (Malhotra et al., 2004, p. 337).

H2 Tracking policy will increase privacy concerns
H2a Anonymity in the online platform will reduce the effect of tracking policy on privacy concern
H2b Distributed Network in the online platform will reduce the effect of tracking policy on privacy concern

Online Civic Participation Behavior

Mostly when people have a positive attitude toward something such as information systems, they are more likely to use them (Davis, 1992). Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA, Ajzen & Fishben, 1977) also supports when people have an attitude about the item, they will have an intention to reflect their attitude to behaviors. These behaviors are captured as the purchase of the item, use of the service, or recommendation to others (Cronin et al., 2000). In this way, a positive and strong attitude toward online civic participation is likely to have a positive impact on participation intention. However, the construct that has negative characteristics has a negative influence on intention and behavior (Libaque-Saenz, 2016).

H4: Perceived threats will negatively affect the online civic participation.
H5: Privacy concern will negatively affect the online civic participation.

Research Methodology

To examine the proposed hypotheses, we will conduct a mixed method study as suggested by Venkatesh et al. (2013). First, we are going to conduct qualitative research in the form of an in-depth interview with Malaysian citizens who have participated in the Bersih anticorruption movement in 2015. Through the interview, we will confirm the related threats and concerns as well as the user protection technology. Second, we will conduct a pilot test to confirm the reliability and the validity of the measurement items and model. Third, we will collect survey data from the individuals who have participated and continuously involved with the Bersih anticorruption movement. After collecting the data, we will use structural equation modeling to analyze the suggested research model.

Survey Instruments

A survey instrument will be developed by applying measures that have been validated in prior work. Modifications will be made to fit them into the context of online civic participation. Different threats will be measured with the items adapted from previous literature including Ajzen (1991), Mattick and Clarke (1997), and Maddux, Galinsky, Cuddy, and Polifroni (2008). The measurement items for privacy concerns are mainly brought from Dinev and Hart (2004). Each threat and the willingness to participate will be asked in the form of 7-point Likert scales.

Conclusion

Freedom of speech and citizens’ active participation in social activism foster checks and balances to ensure a healthier society. To achieve this, society needs to embrace technologies that allow them to stay connected with others. In this study, we propose a research model to understand the factors that facilitate citizens’ online civic participation.
REFERENCES


