The Effect of Social Networks Sites (SNSs) on the Egyptian 25/30 Uprisings

Rasha Hussein Abdel Aziz Mostafa, Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt
Samaa Taher Attia, British University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of social networking sites’ (SNSs) characteristics on Egyptians’ perception and attitude towards the 25/30 uprisings, also known as the “Arab Spring”. Data were obtained from 422 Egyptian university students using SNS by means of questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted to test the research hypotheses. The study results indicate that SNSs’ characteristics positively influence the Egyptian protesters’ perceptions, particularly regarding unity. Such unity affected the protesters’ attitudes, which in turn resulted in the uprisings. To further generalize the research model, it is recommended to be examined in other Arab Spring contexts. Nevertheless, this empirical and quantitative testing of the relationships between SNSs characteristics, perception, attitude and uprising is a newly introduced model on which scarce empirical research exists. Therefore, this study diminishes the paucity of information on the role of SNS in shaping the Egyptian protesters perceptions and attitudes during the “Arab Spring”.

Keywords: Egypt, Egyptian Revolution, Social Media, Social Networking Sites, Uprising

INTRODUCTION

The adoption and diffusion of web-based sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have attracted the interest of many researchers and scholars to explore and study social networking sites (SNSs) (Light & McGrath, 2010; Hamade, 2013). This concern and attention were intensified with the evolution of mobile technology, which eases user accessibility and connectivity to their favorite SNSs, and considerably affects their popularity (Kasavana et al., 2010). SNSs allow people to be visible, stay connected and share their interests in work, personal and political issues (Hamade, 2013; Light & McGrath, 2010; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Hacker & Van Dijk, 2000). Politically speaking, SNSs recently played a fundamental role in a number of social movements in the Middle East, as well as in the 2012 United States presidential campaigns (Chebib & Sohail, 2011, Bor, 2014). Although SNSs have become a fact of life, and despite the heightened

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attention from the academic side, little research has been published outside the USA and Europe, particularly in Arab countries (Shen & Khalifa, 2010; Mansour, 2012). This paper is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, as well as to examine the role of SNS in Egypt’s uprisings.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The waves of demonstrations that expanded across a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region during 2011 were mainly calling for freedom, democratic reforms, lower unemployment figures, respect for human rights, and social justice. Such revolutions and social movements would have not been recognized globally without the use of social networking sites (SNSs) and social media.

Boyd and Ellison (2008, p.210) defined SNS such as Facebook and Twitter as “web-based services that allow individuals to a) create a public profile within a bounded system; b) accumulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and c) view and use their list of connections and the lists made by others within the site”. Meanwhile, Evans (2008) and Benmamoun et al., (2012) highlighted the participative features of SNS that allow users to share and generate content in terms of texts, photos and videos, to stay connected with friends and family, to advertise and to be present online. Consistent with Benmamoun, Sánchez-Fanco et al. (2012) added that beside SNS’s participative feature, they encourage mutually beneficial relationships and feelings of belongingness among users. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005, cf. Kasavana et al., 2010, p.69) defined SNS users as “people who come together for a particular purpose, and who are guided by policies [. . .], and supported by software”. Further, White et al. (2009) (cf. Mansour, 2012, p.130) defined SNS as “any web-based application allowing individuals to connect, communicate, and collaborate with one another”.

There are many types of SNS. Lenard (2004) identified five common types as follows: 1) General. SNSs that allow meeting, socializing and sharing content with friends (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). 2) Practice. SNSs where professionals and practitioners can contact and exchange ideas (e.g. LinkedIn). 3) Interest. SNSs where people who share the same interest as music, politics, or sports can meet and socialize (e.g. Edemocracy.org “political discussion group”). 4) Affinity. SNSs that people who share similar demographic characteristics or affiliations to a certain geographic area can join, such as women or Arab Americans. Finally, 5) Sponsored. SNS developed by government or non-for-profit organizations (e.g. Nike, IBM).

Clearly, there is consensus among researchers that SNSs enable participants to connect, entertain, share personal information with family, friends or even strangers, and also to interact according to shared interests.

Chebib and Sohail (2011) categorized the SNS features and characteristics that facilitated and accelerated the Egyptian revolution into the following: a) Ease of access and use of SNS particularly with new mobile phone-enabled technology, as well as the minimal effort needed to join any social media network (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). b) Credibility of information distributed via SNS that, while questionable, the authors assert is uncensored, unedited and uncontrollable information, the availability of which on SNSs makes it credible - mostly to youngsters, who constitute almost 78% of Egyptian Facebook users. The researchers also claimed that information credibility stems from the fact that all news updates come from eyewitnesses at the time and place of the event. c) Social networks allow for instant information updates at zero physical distance, hence permit faster change that would have taken much longer without their use. Finally, d) the multi-dimensional media aspect that allows users to simultaneously communicate across platforms and share photos, videos and presentations.
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