From Street Protests to Facebook Campaigns: Political Cynicism, Efficacy and Online Political Engagement of Sri Lankan Students

Chamil Rathnayake, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI, USA

ABSTRACT

This study examines effects of political cynicism and efficacy on online political engagement of Sri Lankan undergraduates. A survey was conducted among 155 Sri Lankan undergraduates that support the views of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), an evidently anti-government student movement that claims to be dedicated to protecting free education in the country. Initial analysis showed that respondents were highly cynical (mean: 4.49 on a 1 to 5 scale). The study hypothesized that both political cynicism and efficacy exert a positive impact on online political engagement of respondents. The study also tested the effects of two moderators (extent of Facebook use, and the year of study). Results showed that political cynicism exerts a positive impact (standardized coefficient: .274, p:.000) on online political engagement, and this effect is positively moderated by the extent of Facebook use (standardized coefficient: .261, p:.000). Results also showed that internal political efficacy is not a significant predictor of the dependent variable.

Keywords: Cynicism, Efficacy, Social Media, Political Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Social networks provide interactive platforms for local communities to play a more active role in politics. Political behavior on social networks is affected by factors including citizens’ trust in government and frustration towards politics. Although many researchers have studied political cynicism and efficacy in the context of offline politics, these constructs have not been examined adequately in the context of online social networks. Several researchers have paid attention on political cynicism and efficacy with special attention on online politics (e.g. English et al., 2011; Hanson et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2009). However, further studies are required to examine effects of political cynicism on online political engagement in developing context, South Asian context in particular. This study suggests that online political engagement should
be examined in specific contexts, considering
issues that affect local communities. Political
participation is context-dependent. A citizen’s
interest in different policy issues may directly
affect his/her engagement in each debate.
Therefore, examining political engagement in
specific contexts is a better approach to under-
stand dynamics of online political engagement.

Many researchers have focused on specific
cases or contexts to study public participation
in politics and policymaking (e.g., Irvin &
Stansbury, 2004; Rowe, Marsh, & Frewer,
2004; Halvorsen, 2003). Accordingly, selecting
a policy issue that has inspired online activism
would help model online political engagement.
Developing countries are rapidly developing
their ICT infrastructure, and South Asia is no
exception. As a result, citizens in South Asian
countries increasingly embrace social media.
Political engagement in South Asian countries
is important to study as these countries have
unique political cultures. There is a dearth of
studies that focus on social media activism in
South Asia. This study attempts to fill this gap
by examining political cynicism, efficacy, and
online public engagement in the context of stu-
dent activism in Sri Lanka. In many countries,
university students are considered radical and
politically active. This is the case in Sri Lanka
where undergraduates are considered radical,
politically active, and organized. Accordingly,
this study focuses on examining relationships
among political cynicism, efficacy, and online
political engagement of Sri Lankan under-
graduates.

This study surveyed supporters of the
Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF),
Sri Lanka. IUSF is a non-registered student
movement consisting of voluntary members.
Its membership mainly consists of undergradu-
ates representing student unions in national
universities in Sri Lanka. Although IUSF is a
non-registered body, it is a main political force
in the country that has critically influenced the
higher education sector in Sri Lanka for more
than three decades. This movement was started
in 1978 as a leftist student movement. Currently,
membership of IUSF consists of student unions
representing 16 universities and higher educa-
tional institutes in Sri Lanka (see “www.iusfsl.
org”). This movement considers protecting free
education as its primary responsibility, and it
has fought relentlessly against privatization
of higher education. Supporters of IUSF are
generally explained as cynical, radical, and
anti-government. This group is sufficiently
computer-literate and familiar with Web 2.0
platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and blogs.
During the last three decades, they have used
several forms of influence such as petitions,
class boycotts, street protests, and even hunger
strikes to fight for their cause. However, this
group seems to be increasingly embracing
social media to spread their message across
different groups and promote their activism. The
IUSF Facebook page is very active, and many
unions representing IUSF also maintain their
own Facebook pages. They use these pages to
promote their activism. IUSF supporters are a
suitable population to study engagement of a
group that is generally considered to be cynical.
This study focuses on this specific context to
tap into possible relationships between political
cynicism, efficacy and online public engage-
ment of pro-IUSF undergraduates.

RELATED LITERATURE
Online political engagement has been subject
to extensive research. Recent literature related
to this topic cover a range of factors such as
political efficacy (e.g., Chan & Guo, 2013),
motivations and predispositions (e.g., Macafee,
2013), exposure to shared political information,
network size and heterogeneity (e.g., Tang &
Lee, 2013), and exposure to political difference
(e.g., Kim, 2011) that affect online political
engagement. Table 1 summarizes some of the
recent studies conducted on online political
engagement. As indicated by Table 1, the vast
majority of these studies have been conducted
in Western countries, the United States in par-
ticular. While the majority of recent research has
been conducted in the developed context, there
is a lack of attention on developing countries in
Geographic Information Networks in American Indian Governments and Communities
[www.igi-global.com/article/geographic-information-networks-american-indian/45775?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/geographic-information-networks-american-indian/45775?camid=4v1a)

Digital Resources and Approaches Adopted by User-Centred Museums: The Growing Impact of the Internet and Social Media
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-resources-and-approaches-adopted-by-user-centred-museums/203356?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-resources-and-approaches-adopted-by-user-centred-museums/203356?camid=4v1a)