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# Social Media and Polity: Network, Exposure, Preferences and Triggers

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**Abstract.** A survey of 2,500 social media users across the Indian state of Tamil Nadu is conducted to identify the kinds of networks that users build on online social media and relate them with political content exposed to and preferred, apart from the triggers for sharing content. Study results indicate that people who engage in political criticism and discussion on social media tend to mostly have socio-centric networks of friends and educational-professional acquaintances. It is further observed that about 50 percent of social media users network only with friends and people already known. Users in open networks that characterise connections among people unknown or whom they haven't met are about 10 percent across the social media platforms. Users in closed networks mostly prefer political memes and criticism. Humour is found to be the top trigger (inducing factor) for political content sharing and proximity, the least influential. Political content such as news, views and videos are mostly preferred by users across social networks: Egocentric, Socio-centric, Open and Mixed.

**Keywords.** *Political communication, social media, social network, political participation, memes*

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## **Introduction**

Technological advancements infuse all aspects of our lives, thanks to the internet of things, especially the smartphones that are now ubiquitous and have been helpful in connecting people. While connected devices facilitate the architecture of the internet, the latter networks the actors that use it and results in socialisation of people in such networks. Social networking sites have seen an exponential growth in the recent past with the user base estimated to be over 4.14 billion (Statista, 2021). Social networking sites in diverse categories are able to engage users with shared interests and connect them. With the ever-evolving dynamic features of social networking sites, it has covered a considerable wide aspect via social media platforms, where people can use it. It is imperative that a framework is built to precisely address the regarded network structure and importance be given (Wu, Sun and Tan 2013). A network structure exploration could explain social structures diligently and contribute to social media research.

When we trace social media and social networking research in the past few decades, it has addressed a plethora of themes and a few related to the present study are reviewed: Information systems research pertaining to products and service-oriented businesses focused on user-generated content (Chen et al, 2011; Wei et al, 2013; Luo and Zhang, 2013),

feedback (Centeno et al, 2015), travellers seeking information on social media sites (Burgess et al. 2011), reviews (Dellarocas et al, 2010; Hwang et al, 2011; Cheung et al, 2012; Kuan et al, 2015) and recommendation aspects (Hildebrand et al, 2013, Zhang and Piramuthu, 2016).

Most of the studies on eParticipation and social networking sites focused on the contents posted among online communities (Bateman et al, 2011; Butler and Wang, 2012; Ray et al, 2014) and blogs (Chau and Xu, 2012; Singh, 2014) in particular aimed at user satisfaction. Another set of studies on traditional vis-a-vis social media (Wattal et al, 2010; Miranda et al, 2016) has been conducted to identify their effects. Some of the studies had also addressed the integration of social media with the marketing strategies, and their impact on users (customers), user-generated content (Goh et al, 2013) and the social media environment (García-Crespo et al, 2010). The success of such dynamic platforms relies on how much content exchange happens within peers networks (Susarla et al, 2016). As we could now assume that the impact of social media relies on the digital content produced, network structures and how the users interact within them, it gives a direction to the present study to relate the network type with usage and preferences of the users. A series of studies had examined usage of social media platforms, user behaviour and consequences connected with social media adoption (Massari, 2010; Kreps, 2010; Garg et al, 2011; Turel and Serenko, 2012; Susarla et al, 2012; Zeng and Wei, 2013; Chang et al, 2014; Krasnova et al, 2015; Matook et al, 2015; Turel, 2015, Maier et al, 2015) and observed adverse effects such as over dependence, stress and information overload (Kapoor et al, 2018). Motivations to use social media are associated with the way the user engages with the platform (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016), using the features provided by the applications and impression of their personal characteristics (Gu et al, 2014). A section of the users identify their social media profiles as their personality and social identity (Kreps, 2010).

Moreover, users posting and sharing content without being aware of its origin and authenticity is becoming a major issue to ponder over, especially in political contexts. A handful of studies had attempted to conceptualise social media frameworks (Baur, 2017) using abstract modelling techniques (Rosenberger et al, 2017) to identify the patterns and structures of user communication, especially about political issues on online social media. Since individual social media usage patterns and online attitudes are unique and evolving, it makes sense to address social media problems in longitudinal fashions (Maier et al, 2015). Furthermore, in line with these studies, it becomes pertinent to identify the kinds of networks users build online. Network analysis becomes more crucial when studying political communication online and it could bridge theoretical gaps in social media research and explain social relationships formed among people online by relating them with other phenomena. Moreover, social networks could influence online behaviour of those connected within those networks (Dunn, 1983).

Technology boom in India and the ease of access to the internet even at the grassroots level have increased the social media user base to 326.1 million in 2018 and it is expected to reach 448 million in 2023, a notable increase (Statista, 2021a). These expeditiously thriving numbers denote the explosion of the internet user base in hybrid media systems and had become imperative to seriously consider digital platforms for political propaganda in India (Neyazi et al, 2016). Political leaders and parties see it as a boon to reach out to the electorate with ease and measure their influence. It had also been hypothesised that social media could increase political participation and exposure to political content. Revelations about social media use and influence during elections have compelled the political fraternity to flock to the digital arena.

It has also become customary for parties and leaders to hire professionals for the management of social media activities as proxies (Rajput, 2014). This paradigmatic shift of political parties and leaders complying with the social media applications and blending the political activities through the social media network requires deliberation. Are parties and leaders engaging with the electorate on social media to inform them and encourage them to participate in politics (Bennett, 2008) or those on social networking sites overlooking the politics to make social media as a part of their daily routine? A major part of the information shared on social media are not related to civic affairs and social media act as an alternative medium to television to provide entertainment (Correa et al, 2010). Social media has paved the way for a participatory digital culture because of the hybrid media environment and creative digital content such as memes play an important role among the users encouraging them to actively participate in the digital sphere (Huntington, 2017).

In this age of increasing social media popularity and their use, research on the implications of expressing political views and attitudes are limited (Ellison et al, 2007; Pasek et al, 2009). Social networking sites offer a variety of tools to their users to express opinions and share them online, including public comments, shared videos and photos (Gil et al., 2012). Memes are used as one of the effective tools for political propaganda on social media with collectivised strategies (Ross and Rivers 2017), where studying these memes lead to understanding democratic values and contribution (Huntington, 2013). Online social media could also be used to gain wide and varied insights about users, their attitudes and behaviours (Barclay, 2015 & 2017; Barclay et al, 2014, 2014a, 2015, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Nair & Barclay 2017). Social network theory that analyses social networks online, small and comprehensive systems, asserts that shared interests among users in networks explain the formation of relationships and the way they are networked, which in turn influences their behaviour. The complicated relationships in a network were evaluated using social network analysis which adopts various analytical techniques such as visualisation, mapping and mathematical modelling. Social networking is composed of components that include network environment and actors and their position in the network (Vraga, 2016). Reviewing

the types of online social network, three identified are egocentric, socio-centric and open networks. The present study aims to relate network type that the actors (social media users) are part of with their political exposure, preference and triggers to share political content on online social media. Accordingly, the following research questions are raised:

*RQ1: Is the social network type associated with exposure to political content on social media, political information preferred on social media and the triggers for sharing political content on online social media?*

*RQ2: Are exposure to political content on social media, political information preferred on social media and the triggers for sharing political content on online social media interrelated?*

### **Research method**

Multistage-cluster sampling technique is adopted for this quantitative survey of 2,500 social media users to choose respondents from across the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Social networking type, Level of exposure to political content, Political information preferred and Triggers (inducing factors) for sharing political content are the variables developed for this study. Social network type is categorised as Egocentric (network of close-knit family members, friends and relatives), Socio-centric (network with educational and professional connections), Open (network with people unknown or whom users haven't met) and Mixed.

Political content exposure is measured as a scale variable with the following seven items: News, Views, Criticism, Jokes, Videos, Memes and Discussion, all using a five-point scale. Political information preferred is measured as a nominal variable with the following seven items: News, Views, Criticism, Discussion, Videos, Links and Memes, with the options of 'not preferred', 'preferred' and 'most preferred'.

Triggers for sharing political information is measured with the following six items: Informative, Humour, Shock/Surprise, Impact, Human interest and Proximity, with dichotomous responses of 'triggered' and 'not triggered'.

### **Analysis and Results**

*RQ1: Is the social network type associated with exposure to political content on social media, political information preferred on social media and the triggers for sharing political content on online social media?*

To test the associations between social network types that users are part of on social media and exposure to political content on social media, political information preferred on

social media and the triggers for sharing political content on online social media, one-way Anova and Chi-square tests are performed and the results are presented in Tables 1 to 3.

**Table 1: One-way Anova: Social Network Type vs. Exposure**

DV	Mean scores				Significance
	Ego	Socio	Open	Mixed	
Exposure to political content	24.7149	25.5303	26.401	24.575	Not significant

Social Network Type is not found to be associated with Exposure to political content. That is, the level of exposure to political content is similar across social networks.

**Table 2: Chi-square test results: Social Network Type vs. Political Information Preferred**

Political Information Preferred	Social Network Type			
	Egocentric	Socio-centric	Open	Mixed
News	1239	595	173	207
Percent	90.10	87.88	83.57	85.89
Views	1130	561	159	206
Percent	82.18	82.86	76.81	85.47
Criticism	802	430	127	141
Percent	58.3	63.51	61.35	58.50
Discussion	899	502	129	168
Percent	65.38	74.15	62.31	69.70
Videos	1107	541	159	200
Percent	80.50	79.91	76.81	82.98
Links	854	490	147	183
Percent	62.10	72.37	71.01	75.93
Memes	1064	537	139	189
Percent	77.38	79.32	67.14	78.42

Test results show that Social Network Type is associated with the preferences for political information on social media. While those on Egocentric social networks prefer political news, views and videos the most, those on Socio-centric networks want political news, views, videos and memes to be circulated the most on social media platforms. Those with Open social networks prefer political news, views and video on social media just as those on Egocentric networks and mixed social networks on social media platforms.

Table 3: Chi-square test results: Social Network Type vs. Triggers

Triggers	Social Network Type			
	Ego-centric	Socio-centric	Open	Mixed
Informative	947	440	109	128
Percent	68.87	64.99	52.65	53.52
Humour	767	342	81	112
Percent	55.78	50.51	39.13	46.47
Shock Surprise	404	187	58	49
Percent	29.38	27.62	28.01	20.33
Impact	270	157	55	38
Percent	19.63	23.19	26.57	15.76
Human Interest	429	262	67	62
Percent	31.2	38.70	32.36	25.72
Proximity	288	115	35	62
Percent	20.94	16.98	16.90	25.72

Test results show that Social Network Type is associated with the Triggers for sharing social media messages. Across the networks on social media platforms, informative and humorous messages are the ones that witness the most shares.

Moreover, it is observed that informative content is preferred the most than other types of political information on social media. Among the social network types, the informative and humour information on social media is mostly preferred by Egocentric and followed by the Socio-centric, Mixed and Open types of social networks.

*RQ2: Are exposure to political content on social media, political information preferred on social media and the triggers for sharing political content on online social media interrelated?*

One-way Anova and Chi-square tests are run to test the associations among the variables exposure to political content on social media, Political Information Preferred and the Triggers for Sharing and the results are presented in Tables 4 to 6.

**Table 4. T-Test results: Exposure to political content vs. Triggers**

Triggers	Mean scores		
	Not triggered	Triggered	Significance
Informative	22.5811	26.4011	Significant at 0.05
Humour	24.1093	25.9393	Significant at 0.05
ShockSurprise	24.2913	27.0545	Significant at 0.05
Impact	24.476	27.2923	Significant at 0.05
HumanInterest	24.0024	27.2317	Significant at 0.05
Proximity	24.926	25.606	Not significant

All Trigger variables barring Proximity are associated with the Exposure to political content on social media. Those who have high exposure to political content on social media tend to share informative, humorous, shocking and impactful messages with an element of human-interest in them on social media.

**Table 5. One-way Anova: Exposure to political content vs. Political Information Preferred**

Preferences	Mean scores			Significance
	Not preferred	Preferred	Most preferred	
News	22.7483	25.1526	25.4884	Significant at 0.05
Views	22.545	25.0089	26.744	Significant at 0.05
Criticism	23.565	26.187	25.7816	Significant at 0.05
Discussion	23.6272	25.2973	26.5561	Significant at 0.05
Videos	23.568	25.1799	25.7803	Significant at 0.05
Links	24.6501	25.1352	25.5605	Not significant
Memes	23.2364	25.345	25.9379	Significant at 0.05

Test results indicated that all the preference variables barring Links are associated with the Exposure to political content on social media. Those who have high levels of exposure to political content on social media prefer political criticism and highly prefer political news, views, discussion, videos and memes on social media.

Test results indicate that the triggers for sharing social media messages are statistically associated with the user preferences for political content on social media.

While those who are inclined to share informative content on social media prefer political news, criticism and discussions on social media, those who tend to share humorous messages on social media prefer political news and memes. Those who mainly share shocking and surprising messages on social media want mostly political criticism and discussions to be circulated on social media.

**Table 6: Chi-square Test: Triggers vs. Political Information Preferred**

Preferences	Triggers for sharing					
	Informative	Humour	Shock/Sur	Impact	HI	Proximity
News	1514	1186	631	487	726	462
Percent	68.38	53.56	28.50	21.99	32.79	20.86
Views	1389	1074	576	456	672	436
Percent	67.55	52.23	28.01	22.17	32.68	21.20
Criticism	1023	792	452	346	519	339
Percent	68.2	52.8	30.13	23.06	34.6	22.6
Discussion	1155	879	512	390	606	336
Percent	68.02	51.76	30.15	22.96	35.68	19.78
Videos	1326	1050	506	435	662	392
Percent	66.06	52.31	25.21	21.67	32.98	19.53
Links	1088	844	471	372	567	355
Percent	6.99	50.41	28.13	22.22	33.87	21.20
Memes	1303	1075	576	440	672	437
Percent	67.54	55.72	29.86	22.80	34.83	22.65

Social media users who mainly circulate impactful social media messages, however, just want political criticism on social media. Those who intend to mainly share social media messages with a human-interest element in them go for political criticism, discussions and memes on social media and those who look out for messages with a local connection on social media seek mainly political criticisms and memes on social media platforms.

### **Discussion**

Of the 2,500 respondents who participated in the study, 794 (31.8%) respondents had low levels of Exposure to political content on social media, while 1386 (55.4%) respondents had moderate levels of Exposure to political content on social media and the remaining 320 (12.8%) high levels of Exposure to political content on social media.

A majority of the social media users either prefer or highly prefer political news, views, videos and memes on social media and do not want political criticism, discussions and links. Informative and humorous messages were the most circulated on social media, while the users tended to pay the least heed to impact of these messages and proximity (local relevance) of the messages circulated on these platforms that have a global outlook. The proliferation of technology and ease of access to social networking sites have changed the way political communication takes place in our country. Politicians and political parties tend to believe that these social media are helpful in establishing direct contact and instant

communication with the voters. Study findings show that the level of exposure to political content does not vary across social networks (egocentric, socio-centric, open and mixed), but the social network type is associated with the preferences for political information on social media and triggers. Memes are the most favoured among those in socio-centric networks.

An association between political information preferred and the type of social network users are part of as espoused in the present study is also in line with the studies reviewed that emphasis on a relationship between social networks and content type (Vraga, 2016). Regardless of the type of social network an individual belongs to, political news is the most preferred. It is further suggested to critically review news literacy which plays an important role in building perceptions about online information (Vraga & Tully, 2019). People in the socio-centric networks who have connections with their colleagues and friends prefer memes the most, expressing interest in satire (Rahimi, 2015).

Those in the other types of networks did not consider and prefer memes as political content (Greenwood et al, 2016). Political memes are used not only to express political views but also as a great tool to share, comment on and criticise public and social issues (Huntington, 2015). Memes have the potential to reach grassroots levels to help understand the politics and happenings. As our study findings indicate, nearly 80 percent of the socio-centric networked people preferred memes as their political content.

When it comes to the type of content, the study results indicate that informative and humorous political content trigger sharing online across all the social network types (Egocentric, Socio-centric, Open and Mixed). In contrast, humour is not considered as a means for criticism by political journalists (Mourao et al, 2016), as they work on normative standards. Nevertheless, the type of political content like news, political views, and videos related to politics are preferred by all types of social network users online especially on social media. About 90 percent of social media users were generally found to prefer political content for consumption on social media applications. Political criticism and discussion, however, were the least favoured among the types of political content. Since social media is an online platform open to access transcending national and regional boundaries, proximity and local relevance had the least influence when it comes to sharing of social media content. Presence of useful information in social media messages was weighed above humour though. Such behaviour was prevalent across social networks. Those who had higher exposure to political content on social media tended to share more of informative, humorous, shocking and impactful messages with an element of human-interest in them on social media. Similarly, those who had higher levels of exposure to political content on social media also preferred political criticism and highly preferred political news, views, discussion, videos and memes more on social media.

Social media users who were easily triggered to share informative messages on social media preferred political news, criticism and discussion the most on social media. Those

who tend to share humorous messages on social media prefer political news and memes. Social media users who preferred political views on social media were most triggered to share shocking content and those with a human-interest perspective, after information and humour. Similar was the case with those who preferred political criticism, videos, memes and discussion on social media. Those who preferred links to political content, however, differed: they were least inclined to shared informational content. Instead, they were triggered to share humour and content with a human-interest angle.

In all, useful information and humour were observed to be the top triggers.

As the study findings reflect, article links are for the more politically seasoned while political criticism and discussion in engaging, simpler and creative forms (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2020) are for the layman. Engagement of social media users with their political party activities is the primary motive of any politician or political party, which is possible by posting simple and humorous messages that do not contain rhetorical elements in the content and it is found to be more effective (Ge & Gretzel, 2018).

Humour—accepted as a comfortable means of communication—creates interest among people and induces social interaction (Meyer 2000). Furthermore, humour helps to have a positive influence among the audiences (Meyer 2000) and engages familiar and unfamiliar audiences (Lynch 2002). This potentiality of humour is also reflected in the study results as identified to be one of the top triggers of political content sharing on social media. Political criticism and discussion tend to be vigorous (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Memes are effective when humorous (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2014). In this context, news sharing concurrently facilitates political discussion and criticism (Carlson, 2016). Memes and criticism on social networking sites are mainly preferred and followed by those who are in a closed social network. Social media offers a wide variety of contents for its users, when it comes to political exposure and content proximity doesn't have much relevance.

## **Conclusion**

The Egocentric network was the most popular on social media. That is, social media users tend to have more friends and family members on their social media groups and friends lists, while the second largest group had socio-centric networks of professional and educational acquaintances. While 241 respondents of the 2,500 surveyed had networks of mixed people, 207 had open networks on social media with people that may be known or unknown to them. In recent times, social media is playing a vital role in politics and has become an important tool for political communication. It has captivated the politicians and political parties more than the mainstream media. Social networking sites facilitate users to have a direct relationship and instant communication with the politicians and vice-versa. Therefore, political communication becomes easy and accessible to all, increases more involvement among citizens and might give the feel of citizen-centric governance.

Social media users in egocentric networks of close-knit family members and relatives tend to share informative and humorous messages and prefer political news, views and videos. Those on Socio-centric networks want political news, views, videos and memes to be circulated the most on social media platforms. Those with Open social networks prefer political news, views and video on social media just as those on Egocentric networks and mixed social networks on social media platforms.

It is also interesting to note that across network types, useful information and humour were the best triggers for sharing of messages on social media. Local relevance was the least considered while sharing social media messages. One reason for that is the characteristics of this platform that integrates the users worldwide. Finally, we could observe that above 50 percent of social media users network only with their friends and known persons. People who have connections with the unknown or whom they haven't met are less than 10 percent across the social media platforms.

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