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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Strategic Influence of Virtual Space on the Electoral Behavior of Tehrani Citizens in the 2021 Presidential Election

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

In contemporary political analysis, electoral participation is regarded as a fundamental indicator of a nation's political development. Consequently, the role of mass media, particularly social networks, in mobilizing public political engagement during electoral events has become a critical area of study. Today, social media platforms and virtual spaces, with their vast and predominantly youthful user bases, are instrumental in shaping political discourse and electoral behavior globally. This research examines the impact of social networks and virtual space on the electoral behavior of Tehran's citizens during the 2021 Iranian presidential election.

Methods

This study employed a survey-based field methodology, utilizing a researcher-developed questionnaire. A sample of 390 eligible voters in Tehran was determined using the cluster sampling method based on Cochran's formula. The participants completed and returned the research questionnaire for analysis.

Results

Demographic analysis of the respondents revealed the following composition:

- Education: 5.4% held a high school diploma or less, 8.7% had an associate degree, 26.4% held a bachelor's degree, 50.3% held a master's degree, and 9.5% held a doctorate.
- Gender: 72.6% were male, and 27.4% were female.
- Age: 19% were under 30 years old, 38.7% were between 30 and 40, and 42.3% were over 40.
- Marital Status: 24.4% were single, 73.3% were married, and 2.3% were divorced.

The findings indicated that:

1. The component of passive electoral behavior was rated as moderate (mean = 2.44 out of 5). It was confirmed as a dimension of political participation and ranked first among the studied components (48.8%), confirming the first hypothesis.
2. The component of stereotypical electoral behavior was rated as moderate (mean = 1.69 out of 5). It was confirmed as a dimension of political participation and ranked third (33.8%), confirming the second hypothesis.
3. The component of active electoral behavior was rated as moderate-to-low (mean = 1.84 out of 5). It was confirmed and ranked second (36.8%), confirming the third hypothesis.
4. The Pearson statistic for the effect of gender on 2021 electoral behavior was 0.044, with a regression value of 0.045, confirming the fourth hypothesis.
5. The structural dimension of virtual social networks was rated as moderate (mean = 2.89 out of 5) and ranked first (57.8%), confirming the fifth hypothesis.
6. The interactive dimension of virtual social networks was rated as moderate (mean = 2.65 out of 5) and ranked second (53%), confirming the sixth hypothesis.
7. The functional dimension of virtual social networks was rated as moderate-to-low (mean = 2.29 out of 5) and ranked third (51.8%), confirming the seventh hypothesis.

Conclusion

In summary, this study concludes that social networks and virtual space have significantly influenced the dynamics of citizens' electoral behavior, encompassing passive, stereotypical, and active approaches, thereby enhancing the development of public electoral participation. The hypothesis testing further proved that contextual variables and the various interactive, structural, functional, and demographic dimensions present in social networks and virtual space have a substantial effect on attracting political participation and shaping electoral behavior.

Given the confirmation of all research hypotheses, it is imperative for relevant authorities and policymakers to develop strategic plans to leverage the capacity of social networks and virtual space. This can be achieved by preparing and disseminating appropriate, rich, and engaging content to foster greater political participation during electoral cycles.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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