

# The Effect of Social Media on Political Participation: A Case of Elections at Guilan

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## Abstract

Social media can improve various forms of political participation. This study aims to identify the impacts of social media on political participation in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in Iran. The study hypothesizes that social media have influenced these elections in three dimensions: spectator, transitional and gladiatorial activities. This is a descriptive survey that used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The study used the Delphi method and sought the remarks of key informants (experts) for the collection of qualitative data and used questionnaires distributed among citizens for quantitative data collection. The results indicated that social media significantly increased Gilak citizens' active political participation while it had non-significant impacts on passive behavior patterns.

Keywords: Social media, Online social networks, Political participation, Election, Electoral behavior, Guilan

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## Introduction

The expansion of information and communication technologies has drastically changed the world in the past decades. As a pivotal element in political debates and participation, the internet also plays a critical role in providing people with information related to political events and engaging its consumers in political participation. In the beginning, the internet was only a one-way tool in the hands of parties for spreading information through their websites. However, social media and new technologies have converted unilateral (one-way) communication to bilateral (two-way) communication (da Silva Nogueira & Papageorgiou, 2020: 15). As depicted by the elections in Europe and the U.S. in 2016, social media emerged as a large source of information for billions of users (Boulianne, 2019: 22).

Social media are online communication networks created between users via the internet and cyberspace where the act of sharing information, ideas, images, and videos is easy and real-time (Obar & Wildman, 2010: 159). Social media have various forms and functions. A group of these media networks, including Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Telegram is used mostly for sharing social information. These are social networks (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018: 19). Social networks as vehicles at the service of engendering social movements allow for proving connections between millions of people within an extremely short time. Furthermore, they are not only the new context for attracting people's involvement in sharing news and information, but they also play a key role in structuring movements and public participation.

Social networks considerably impact the social and political training of citizens, particularly young people (khan & Shahbaz, 2010: 222). Young people and university students actively use these new media to obtain political information and discuss politics with others in society (Kim & Chen, 2016: 220).

The results indicate that using social media improves various forms of political participation (Boulianne, 2019: 20; Jandevi, 2019: 27). Political participation can be defined as any form of behavior represented by the citizens to influence some of the political results. The findings related to users' motif and behavior proposed different goals and tendencies for the presence of users online and in social media. People may actively avoid or actively seek political information (Baek, 2010: 12). Nevertheless, the findings of relevant studies report that continuous exposure to political information and discussions on social media improves people's political participation, regardless of their interest or disinterest in political issues (Theocharis and Quintelier, 2016: 821). Using social media to enhance political participation is not only relevant in the developed world, but also it's pretty common in developing countries. In Iran, India, Pakistan, and Egypt, for instance, parties and independent politicians actively use their accounts on social media to spread information for the use of their followers and voters (Pang, Skoric & Zhu, 2016: 339). This study aims to investigate the impacts of social media on political participation using the library and review approaches to present a conceptual model and use the quantitative and qualitative methods to examine these impacts on the electoral behavior of voters in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> presidential elections in (the province of) Guilan.

## ۱. Political participation

The election is the most important representation of political participation in societies.

It is the process of reaching a consensus on how to politically administer society.

Also, it represents the collaborative and quantifiable essence of collective decision-making that is the manifestation of the final will of all citizens

(Alavipour, ۲۰۱۲, ۳۶). In fact, election allows for the indirect presence of people's ideas and demands in general policymaking; hence parties competing for power (Taleb et al., ۲۰۱۰:۱۶۸). Based on Lester W. Milbrath's model (۱۹۶۵), in Political Participation, the electoral behavior is divided into four levels:

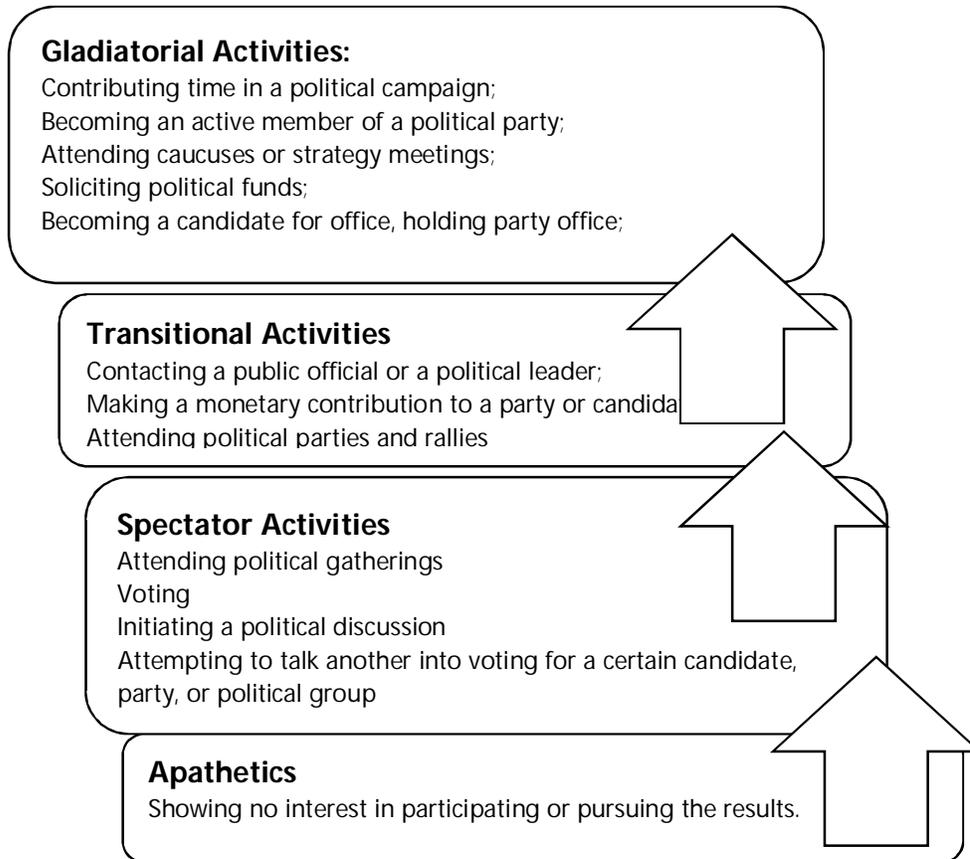


Fig. ۱. Lester Milbrath, Levels of Political Participation (Sadeghi Jaghe, ۱۳۹۵:۹۲)

## ۲. How social media improve political participation

The internet and electronic gadgets improve online users' political knowledge, improve political participation, and play a vital role in political training and getting people together for political issues. Marco, Robles, and Antino (۲۰۱۷), in a study concerning the internet, political interaction, and the effect of digital discussions, information, and activism concluded that promotions in the digital environment directly affects users' political participation before and after the election (Marco, Robles & Antino, ۲۰۱۷:۱۳۷). Rainine et al. (۲۰۱۲) found that ۳۹% of American adults use social media, and ۱ out of every ۸ adults use social media for civil and political

purposes (Rainine et al., 2012:20). In their study to analyze the use of social media for establishing political connections, Stieglitz et al. reported the significantly strong relationship between politicians and the users of social networks (Stieglitz et al., 2012:50). Hellweg found that American voters react to politicians' accounts on social media more than their official website (Hellweg, 2011:20). Raof et al. showed nominees and voters extensively use social media as their connection network (Raof et al., 2012:90). The expansion of social media has affected political participation based on several reasons:

1. Social media sites allow for the rapid, real-time transference of information to the remotest places beyond geographical and distance boundaries (Kent, 2012:322). Social media, especially online networking sites spread news and information worldwide within the shortest time possible and stimulate people to participate in existing issues (Rahmanzadeh, 1389:80).
2. Social media sites allow users to share their ideas, beliefs, issues, problems, information, interests, and so forth (Fuchs & Sndoval, 2012:127). Other studies have reported having daily close relationships with friends and family and acquaintances as one of the most important reasons for users' presence on social media.
3. Social media facilitate the following: the reciprocal relationship between people and organizations; the socio-political, organizational discussions; and the attendance in these discussions (Avidar, 2018:06). Governments and politicians can use social media to access the public, as social media, real online political debates, and blogs are perfect tools to reach the audience. Moreover, new technologies can attract those less conservative voters who may not have the appetite for conventional forms of election (Choi et al., 2017).
4. The emergence of social media has resulted in substantial changes in the systems of socio-political participation and impaired the traditional hierarchal structure of social movements, emphasizing individuals' capacities and participation (GAmson & Sifry, 2012:161). Public participation does not equal accomplishing explicit political goals, as the concept of participation has found broader dimensions. Bennet and Segerberg stated that using social media allows for remote 'connection action.' Under this condition, individuals exchange their ideas remotely and anonymously through social media networks, identified as the connection. The only connecting joint between people is their collective worries and concerns (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012:11). Unlike the traditional movements, moderate changes, like the idea of a social movement going viral, are as critical as reaching the ultimate goal of the movement.

#### **3. Social Media Political Participation Model (SMPPM)**

Since social media can result in a range of changes in the political participation of individuals, this modeling presents four major goals with four distinct stages (Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, 2020:122). At first, social media use is subject to the influence of

prior existing motives, and users have different motives (pre-exposure). Gradually, some users are exposed to some specific political media content (exposure), followed by the processing of the received information (reception). Finally, information processing may lead to specific behavioral outcomes (political participation). Nevertheless, at any of the phases mentioned, users' motivational and behavioral conditions may alter the process, which needs to be thoroughly analyzed.

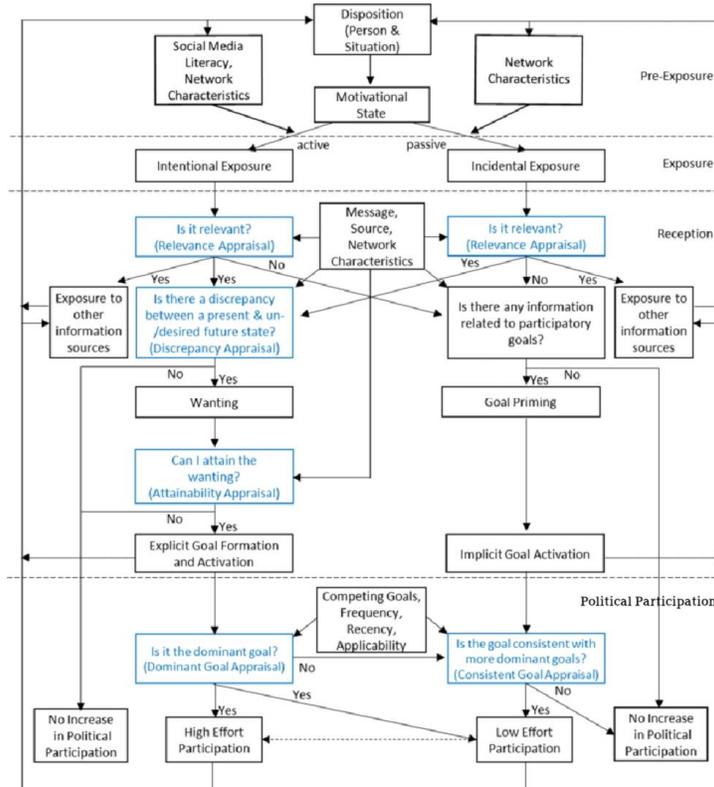


Fig.2. SMPPM (Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2020)

### 3.1 Pre-exposure

In the pre-exposure phase, the individuals' motivational and personal state as well as the characteristics of social media and the specific social media content greatly affect the individuals' interactions with the political content and ultimately their political participation. People use social media with different motives, but their ultimate goal is satisfaction (Chen & Chan, 2017:89). This satisfaction is gained in different forms and ways. For instance, an individual may experience satisfaction by reviewing political news, while the other individuals may gain satisfaction by seeing relaxing photos. Therefore, some users may choose specific social media sites as tools for gaining satisfaction. Accordingly, social media use can be considered a goal-directed action Lane et al., 2017:99). Combined with the situational states and personal traits, users' substantial biological and psychological needs determine the wants and desires of individuals (Dennis, 2018:109). Personal desires encompass all the personal characteristics, including personality traits, emotional status, gender, age, or the long-term preferences learned in an individual's lifetime. An interest in political reviewing

as a personal preference may increase the individual's motive to use social media. Moreover, the results of previous studies have indicated that individuals' tendencies may determine the type of political content or information they interact with. For instance, anxious individuals tend to or mostly expose themselves to paradox remarks, whereas exasperation leads to individuals' exposure to relevant content (Choi et al., 2017:27).

### 2.2 Exposure

The users' active presence on social network sites is based on their current motives. Researchers often define two main pathways for the interaction of individuals with political content (Boulianne, 2019:51). At first, the individual actively seeks political information. For instance, users may use the internal search function of a website on social media to find specific news or political content, or Add specific political quarries to the list of their interests and social sites to receive the related information and news regularly (Larsson, 2017:118). On the other side, the individual is randomly exposed to political content. It only takes making a couple of connections with people deeply engaged with politics for those not interested in politics to get exposed to political content both regularly and randomly. At election time, even those users who are just casually online may receive campaign-related posts shared by their friends on social media. Moreover, the findings indicate that the network size has a positive correlation with exposure to political content and political participation. Moreover, higher heterogeneity of the individuals' connections increases the possibility of massive exposure to political content (Tang & Lee, 2013:767).

Finally, it should be noted that page managers on social media sites attempt to expose users to the content and information aligned with their preferences. As deliberate exposure requires active searching for information, users are less impacted by the policies of managers of the political pages. Besides, the individual's literacy also plays an assertive role in distinguishing high-quality information from low-quality content and detecting blind imitation (Heiss & Metthes, 2016:169).

### 2.3 Reception

Users of social media sites assess the political content through exposure to such content. The assessment (appraisal) could be identified as the cognitive processes through which individuals evaluate their interaction with the environment in terms of its impacts on their well-being (Yamamoto, Nah, Bae, 2019:22). Assessment is the adaptation and integration of environmental wants with constraints, desires, attitudes, and tendencies of individuals. Under such conditions, individuals continuously scan their environment to examine whether the occurrence of new events requires more attention and adaptive reactions (Jandevi, 2019:69).

Considering the high volume of information on social network sites, users constantly have to decide which source of information is authentic for more processing. There are various levels of stimulus processing. Still, primary investigations are more or less automatic, allowing for easy and smooth decision-making on lower processing levels. Neural processing structures are designed to prevent a plethora of stimuli from reaching higher levels of processing under the influence of various factors like

tendencies, attitudes, and so forth (Scherer, 2001:93). Scherer believes three types of stimuli find the chance to be processed: (1) new information (2) inherently pleasurable or pleasant information that triggers intense emotions, and (3) the important information related to users' actual goals. In all categories, information needs to exceed a primary processing threshold (Scherer, 2001:93). Accordingly, relevant research studies on social media have represented that users choose political information first and foremost if it is associated with their personal interests or reliable and authentic sources. For example, if a piece of political content receives many likes, it may be processed as a reliable piece of information (yang, 2016:25V). Moreover, some pieces of content can provoke intense instances of emotions, such as anxiety or delight. Studies have revealed that emotional outburst increases information processing, boosting individuals' understanding of an issue. In fact, if users are exposed to a piece of political content, depending on its source, its relation to their friends in the SNS (a social network site), and the correlation of that piece of content's message with their goals and attitudes, allocate a different level of processing to it. This procedure is called relevant appraisal (da Silva Nogueira & Papageorgiou, 2020:15-18).

After a piece of political content is appraised as relevant, greater processing is conducted. Besides, users may expose themselves to other sources of information related to the issue, for instance, online and offline media, as well as interpersonal connections. As stated by Boulianne, social media seem to be highly effective in increasing the interest of users for political engagement. They actively deal with the content that can improve the motivation to be present in other sources of information (Boulianne, 2011:159).

When users of social network sites (SNS) begin extensively processing the political content, they also evaluate (appraise) different potential outcomes of that content. This is called the discrepancy appraisal. The user evaluates, wondering: is there any difference between a present state and a desired or undesired state in the future? Will political participation lead to a favorable state or prevent an unfavorable one? In discrepancy appraisal, the greater the difference between the current conditions and the upcoming favorable/unfavorable state in the future, the higher the motivation for political participation in the individual (Knoll et al., 2020:137).

Nevertheless, individuals set goals for political participation only if they believe they can attain those goals via their personal action (Kruganski, Jasko & Chernikova et al., 2010:110). This appraisal style is called the attainability appraisal. Political research findings have frequently represented that if individuals believe their actions in the political realm are effective, they will politically participate. More specifically, research studies often distinguish between one's perceived competence (internal efficacy), the perceived responsiveness of the political system to one's demands (external efficacy), and the political system's perceived responsiveness to collective demands. Only if the results of both appraisals, the discrepancy, and the attainability, are positive, a goal is formulated and activated. Accordingly, a goal can be defined as a desirable future state of affairs one intends to attain through action (Kruglanski, et al., 2012:369).

### 3.5 Political participation

Once a goal is explicitly formulated and activated, users evaluate (appraise) whether the goal is a dominant one once they are in active political participation (Kruglanski, et al., 2010:615). This is called the dominant goal appraisal. The appraisal pertains to the fact that people usually activate multiple goals yet do not have the time and ability to attain all of them simultaneously. Therefore, the political goal may be overridden by other goals during the prioritization. For instance, for a person who is suffering from hunger and poverty, participating in an environmental protest may be a low priority. Therefore, the dominance of a participatory goal is dependent on its level of activation in relation to competing goals' activation levels. The stronger the activation of competing goals, the greater the inhibition of the participatory goal. Activation is dependent on the accessibility and applicability of goals. Accessibility, in turn, is influenced by the recency and frequency of prior goal activation. The more recent and frequent goal has been activated, the greater its accessibility. Applicability refers to the overlap of features of one's goals. The stronger the overlap, the greater its applicability (Knoll et al., 2020:129).

The formulation and activation of a goal require a decision to explicitly commit to a goal. Hence, users – at least at first – rather aim for high than for low-effort PP with the former being far more effective in goal attainment (Kruglanski et al., 2010:619), indicating users' limited motivational and behavioral resources. As a result, users tend to save energy for more dominant goals, putting little effort into less relevant goals. These more dominant goals include the current and salient goals in the future. Given a participatory goal is appraised as inconsistent and opposing to the attainment of dominant goals, zero political participation ensues (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007:597).

In addition to explicit processing and formulation of participatory goals, an implicit goal activating pathway is suggested. SNSs' users may appraise a random or purposeful political content they are exposed to as irrelevant. As such, that content will be processed insignificantly. However, it should be noted that extensive conscious processing of a stimulus can lead to a more intense activation of the related knowledge, compared to unconscious stimulus processing. Hence, compared to explicit, formulated, and activated goals, active implicit goals represent lower activation levels (Dennis, 2018:180).

### 3.6 Feedback Processes

Processing political information and the associated behaviors affect personal dispositions and future media use. These feedback processes are activated by goals and political participation, influencing the individual's political knowledge and attitudes (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007:595). Therefore, activated goals direct people's attention to goal-related stimuli in their environment and more social media use. Political participation will affect the network a user is active in. These new acquaintances may, in turn, influence the information a user is exposed to by sharing specific content. Second, software algorithms in social media sites are likely to present users with information related to past online activities All of which positively correlate with the motivation for Political participation (Beam, 2015:1070). **Methodology**

This is a developmental research study with a cross-sectional design, attempting to investigate the effect of social networks on voters' electoral behavior in a range of previous presidential elections in (the province of) Guilan, Iran. Considering the results, this is applied research, and in terms of data collection, it is descriptive survey research. This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting data. The Delphi analysis method in conjunction with asking the key informants was used for the collection of qualitative data, while for the quantitative data collection, the study used a public questionnaire. Furthermore, the study used a combined library-field approach for collecting data. In the concept design and modeling phase, the study investigated the theoretical fundamentals in previous research to establish a framework concerning the effect of social networks on voters' electoral behavior in a range of previous presidential elections in Guilan, Iran, as well as the related levels, dimensions, and indexes. Next, the Delphi panel rated the theoretical fundamentals established (using a Delphi-field approach), which contributed to the final results of this study.

This study attempted to use participants who were experts and had enough motives to participate in the study to increase the validity of research data. Considering the design qualitative goals, the statistical population included key informants as in academics (university professors in political sciences and sociology) organizations (managers and experts in this field with at least ten years in service and five years of management experience, having MAs or above, preferably in political sciences and sociology). The study selected some 20 experts for the Delphi panels in the sciences and organizations groups. This study implemented the sampling network and snowball sampling methods for selecting the experts of the Delphi panels. After the concept design and modeling phase, a five-level Likert scale questionnaire, with authentic content and face validity was distributed between the panel experts for data collection. The five-level scale items were split into two inappropriate, including 1-3 (moderate and below moderate) and appropriate, including 4-5 (greater) sections to ensure its symmetry and balance. The study used Kendall's  $\tau$  coefficient to measure data associated with the Delphi method.

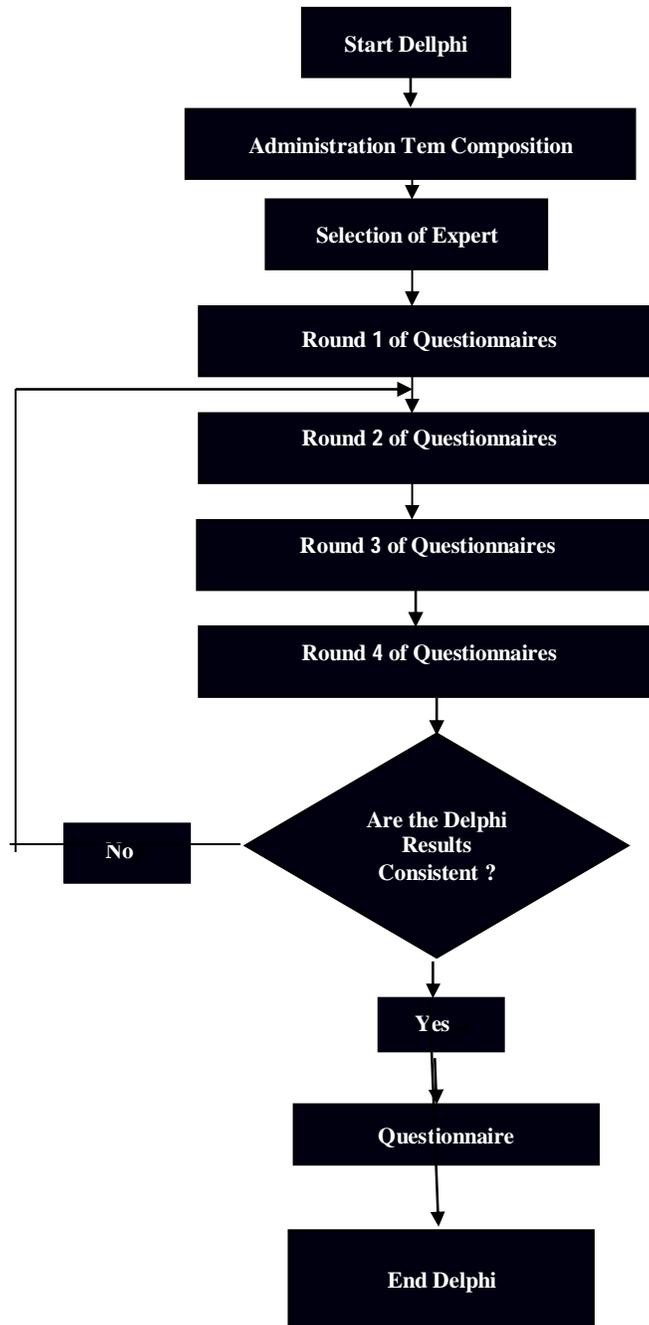
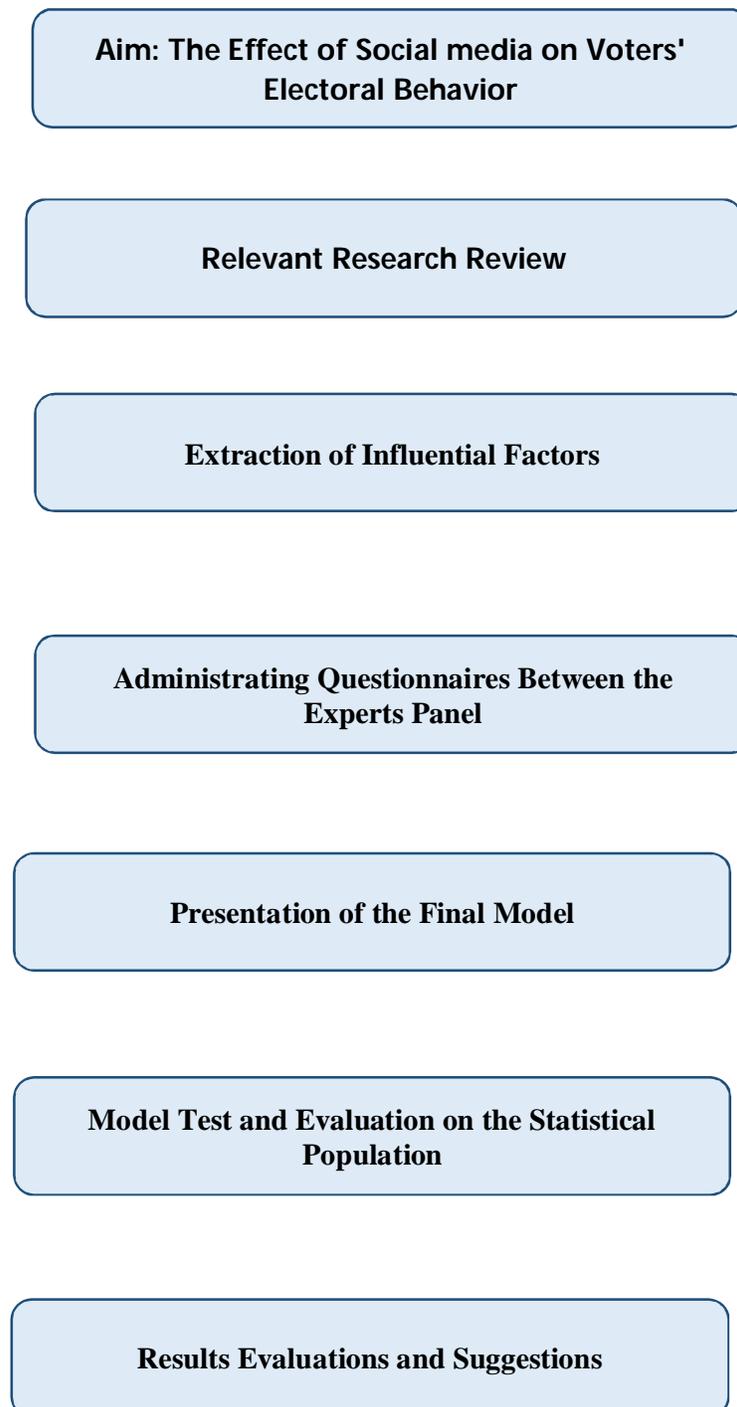


Fig. 5. The Delphi Method

**Fig.ξ.** The Research Procedure



## Results

After the implementation of the Delphi method, some 10 individuals from the statistical population were selected and the questionnaires were distributed among them. The study then used Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) to determine validity. The value of ( $\alpha$ ) for all constructs was above 0.7, indicating the validity of the questionnaire and the respondents' consistent impression of variables related to each construct. Based on the variables measurement model in coefficients' significance state, if t value is not between -1.96 and +1.96, the factor loading is significant at a confidence level of 90%. The t value of all factor loadings was measured at 1.96, therefore, suggesting the validity of questions of the questionnaires for measuring different concepts (Fig.6)

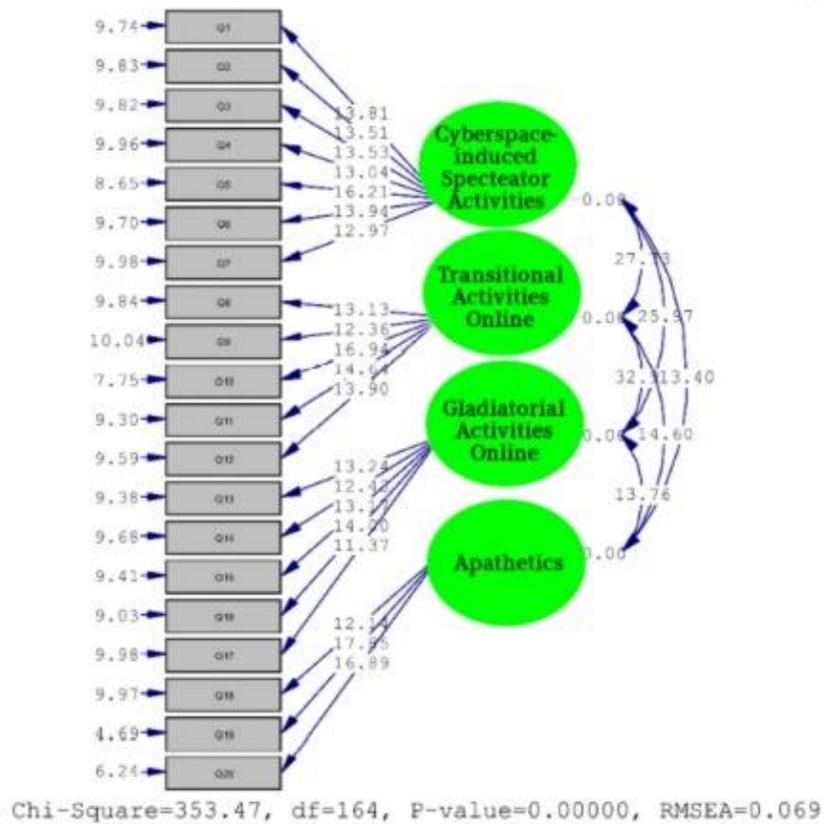


Fig.6. Variables measurement model in coefficients' significance state

Quantitatively, the statistical population, which was consisted of 209 individuals, included: 176 (84%) male, 122 (58%) female, 119 (57% married), 190 (91%) single, 127 (61%) were below 20 years old, 119 (57%) were between 21-29 years old, 106 (51%) were between 30-39 years old, and 27 (13%) were above 40 years old. In terms of educational status, the statistical population included: 70 (33%) had a high school diploma or below, 196 (93%) had a bachelor's degree, 119 (57%) master's degree, and 20 (10%) had a Ph.D. The study used the dispersion index and the central tendency index to describe variables in the study (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Descriptive indexes for the variables separated by the periods of presidential elections

Presidential Election Periods	Variables	Sample Size	Standard Deviation SD	Mean	Normality index		Min-max
					Skewness	Kurtosis	
1 <sup>st</sup> th	VAR1	208	2,2022(+,99)	2,229	-,200	-,002	0,00-1,00
	VAR2	207	2,2291(+,98)	2,200	-,291	-,272	0,00-1,00
	VAR3	207	2,231(+,00)	2,200	-,272	-,702	0,00-1,00
	VAR4	208	2,0121(+,92)	2,000	+,802	+,207	0,00-1,00
11 <sup>th</sup>	VAR1	292	2,2907(+,02)	2,229	-,220	-,760	0,00-1,00
	VAR2	292	2,237(+,98)	2,200	-,222	-,028	0,00-1,00
	VAR3	292	2,2019(+,00)	2,200	-,292	-,706	0,00-1,00
	VAR4	292	1,9222(+,88)	2,000	+,922	+,871	0,00-1,00
12 <sup>th</sup>	VAR1	290	2,2028(+,11)	2,000	-,209	-,788	0,00-1,00
	VAR2	291	2,2223(+,09)	2,200	-,270	-,789	0,00-1,00
	VAR3	292	2,2128(+,11)	2,200	-,278	-,719	0,00-1,00
	VAR4	292	1,8797(+,80)	1,822	1,007	1,100	0,00-1,00

**VAR1**: Cyberspace-induced gladiatorial activity; **VAR2**: transitional activity online

**VAR3**: spectator activity online **VAR4**: spectator activity online **VAR5**:

Based on the results of Table 1:

A: The entire variables in the study were evaluated as desired (greater than 2), except for apathetic behavior (apathetics).

B: The entire variables in the study can be considered normal. Also, the distribution of variables could be considered normal and symmetric.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> th and 11<sup>th</sup> presidential elections, the statement 'I have spent enough time in the cyberspace for engaging in election campaigns' respectively represented the highest average grade as 2,02 and 2,22 while, on the other hand, 'I have no acquaintance with cyberspace or online space' represented the lowest average grade with 1,78 and 1,77, respectively.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election, the statement 'efficient, on-time connection with the audience and users and rapidly informing them on relevant issues in electoral districts is an advantage of social media, and online space' showed an average grade of 2,02. The statement 'I have no acquaintance with cyberspace or online space' had the lowest average grade (1,7).

**Table 7.** Fit indexes of study variables measurement model

<b>Index</b>	<b>Base</b>	<b>Critical Value</b>
$\chi^2/df$	2.155	<3
Goodness-of-fit Indices ( <b>GFI</b> )	0.87	>0/8
Adjusted Goodness-of-fit Indices ( <b>AGFI</b> )	0.84	>0/8
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation ( <b>RMSEA</b> )	0.069	<0/1
Comparative Fit Index	0.93	>0/9
Normed fit Index ( <b>NFI</b> )	0.97	>0/9
Non-Normed Fit Index ( <b>NNFI</b> )	0.98	>0/9
Increasing fit Index ( <b>IFI</b> )	0.98	>0/9

Measured values for fit indexes of the model indicate that the study's model data fit with the study's factor structure and theoretical infrastructure, suggesting the consistency between the questions and the theoretical constructs, hence the validity of this study's model.

**Table 5.** The results of the one-sample t-test

Presidential Election Periods	Variables	Test Value = 3			
		t-statistic	DF	CI for 95% MD	
				Lower limit	Higher limit
<b>10th</b>	<b>VAR1</b>	6.199*	407	0.2078	0.4009
	<b>VAR2</b>	5.119*	406	0.1534	0.3448
	<b>VAR3</b>	4.624*	406	0.1328	0.3292
	<b>VAR4</b>	-21.357*	407	-1.0778	-0.8961
<b>11th</b>	<b>VAR1</b>	5.649*	393	0.1895	0.3918

Presidential Election periods	Variables	Test Value = 3			
		t-statistic	DF	CI for 90% MD	
				Lower limit	Higher limit
		VARI	6,768*	391	0,2282
VARI	2,981*	391	0,1020	0,2013	
VARI	-22,870*	393	-1,1033	-0,9778	
12th	VARI	7,187*	389	0,2932	0,0123
	VARI	6,031*	390	0,2203	0,2233
	VARI	0,071*	391	0,2022	0,2231
	VARI	-26,076*	391	-1,2028	-1,0208

**VARI**: Cyberspace-induced gladiatorial activity; variable **VARI**: transitional activity online; variable **VARI**: spectator activity online; variable **VARI**: spectator activity online **VARI**: spectator activity online; significant: \*

Given the positive higher and lower limits of 'Cyberspace-induced gladiatorial activity,' 'transitional activity online,' and 'spectator activity online,' their average is greater than 3. Therefore, it could be concluded that based on the ultimate higher and lower limits of this output, these three variables' impacts on the voters' electoral behavior in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> presidential elections were positive and significant. The measured average for spectator activities was below 3. As a result, it could be concluded that based on the ultimate higher and lower limits of this output, this variable negatively impacts the voters' electoral behavior in the last three elections.

**Table 5.** The results of the Friedman test concerning the influential factors in voters' electoral behavior in the presidential elections

Election period	Variables	Average rate	Rank
10 <sup>th</sup>	Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace	2,90	1
10 <sup>th</sup>	Transitional Activity in Cyberspace	2,72	2
10 <sup>th</sup>	Spectator Activity in Cyberspace	2,71	3
10 <sup>th</sup>	Apathetics	1,66	4
11 <sup>th</sup>	Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace	2,82	2
11 <sup>th</sup>	Transitional Activity in Cyberspace	2,90	1
11 <sup>th</sup>	Spectator Activity in Cyberspace	2,71	3
11 <sup>th</sup>	Apathetics	1,07	4
12 <sup>th</sup>	Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace	2,98	1
12 <sup>th</sup>	Transitional Activity in Cyberspace	2,77	2
12 <sup>th</sup>	Spectator Activity in Cyberspace	2,72	3
12 <sup>th</sup>	Apathetics	1,01	4

Given the average values in Table 5, in the 10<sup>th</sup> presidential election, at 90% confidence level, Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace and Apathetics variables receptively represented the highest and lowest effect on voters' electoral behavior in the presidential election in Guilan. Under the same condition, in the 11<sup>th</sup> presidential election, Transitional Activity in Cyberspace had the highest effect and Apathetics the lowest. In the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election in Guilan, Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace had the highest effect while, expectedly, Apathetics had the lowest effect on voters' electoral behavior.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics and ANOVA results separated by electoral districts

Variable	Election Period	Quantity	Average	Standard Deviation	F-statistic	Significance Level	Result
Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace	10 <sup>th</sup>	408	2,20	0,99	1,282	.201	Zero Deference
	11 <sup>th</sup>	294	2,29	1,02			
	12 <sup>th</sup>	290	2,20	1,11			
	Total	1192	2,22	1,02			
Transitional Activity in Cyberspace	10 <sup>th</sup>	407	2,20	0,98	.901	.287	Zero Deference
	11 <sup>th</sup>	292	2,24	0,98			
	12 <sup>th</sup>	291	2,22	1,10			
	Total	1190	2,21	1,02			
Spectator Activity in Cyberspace	10 <sup>th</sup>	407	2,22	1,01	.661	.016	Zero Deference
	11 <sup>th</sup>	292	2,20	1,00			
	12 <sup>th</sup>	292	2,21	1,11			
	Total	1191	2,26	1,02			
Apathetics	10 <sup>th</sup>	408	2,01	0,92	2,268	.102	Zero Deference
	11 <sup>th</sup>	294	1,92	0,89			
	12 <sup>th</sup>	292	1,88	0,80			
	Total	1194	1,92	0,89			

As depicted, the significance level of variables is greater than 0,0, allowing for inferring

that the average of the average grade of the three populations (the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> presidential elections) are not significantly different in terms of the analyzed variables.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this research, after investigating the impact model of social media on political participation using the review-library approach, we designed the study questionnaire under the title The Impact of Online Social Networks on Voters' Electoral Behavior in Presidential Elections by utilizing the qualitative Delphi method and analyzing the remarks of academic and organizational experts. The results affirm the validity, reliability, implementability of the study questionnaire. The value of ( $\alpha$ ) for the entire constructs in the study was greater than 0.7, indicating the validity of the questionnaire and the respondents' consistent impression of variables related to each construct. Furthermore, the relevance of questions in the questionnaires for measuring the concepts was rendered valid.

The designed questionnaire was distributed among 209 voters of the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> presidential elections. The results indicated the significant positive impact of the following variables on the voters' electoral behavior in the mentioned elections periods: Gladiatorial Activity Induced by Cyberspace, Transitional Activity in Cyberspace, and Spectator Activity in Cyberspace. Conversely, it was reported that the 'Apathetics' variable was found to have a significantly negative impact. Therefore, it seems that individuals' more positive assumptions of their impact on the state of society will cause them to politically participate more and use social media for accomplishing their goals more effectively. Moreover, the lower the media use, the more representation of apathetic behavior toward political participation among respondents (Kruganski, et al, 2015, 2010; Knoll et al., 2020:150).

In the tenth and twelfth presidential elections, the statement 'I have spent enough time in the cyberspace for engaging in election campaigns' showed the highest average, while in the eleventh period, the statement 'efficient, on-time connection with the audience and users and rapidly informing them on relevant issues in electoral districts is an advantage of social media and online space' represented the highest average grade. These findings refer to participants' purposeful, motivational, and conscious political participation, which is aligned with previous research stating that the higher the motif, consciousness, and the priority of individuals in dealing with political content on social media, the higher their political participation (Yamamoto, et al., 2019:22; Chen & Chan, 2017:19; Skoric et al., 2016:182). On the other hand, the statement 'I have no acquaintance with cyberspace or online space' had the lowest average, allowing for the inference that the majority of voters were familiar with cyberspace and used it for gaining information or optimizing political participation.

This study designed an accurate and purposeful questionnaire for measuring the impact of social media and networks on the political participation of citizens. Furthermore, the study managed to investigate different dimensions of this issue as well as confirming the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. As a result, other researchers can effectively use this questionnaire.

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