THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON NAME RECOGNITION IN THE 2020 DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of social media (Facebook and Twitter) on the name recognition of political candidates, using the 2020 Democratic primaries in the U.S. as a case study. The main objectives of this study were to: (1) identify the way(s) Americans use social media to engage in politics; (2) determine how users see political posts on social media; (3) test users' digital literacy by asking if they knew why they saw these posts; and (4) explore whether these social media posts have any impact on a user's opinion of a political candidate. A national survey was conducted using mixed-mode IVR/online methodology to ask American social media users questions about the four Democratic candidates who were polling highest at the time of the survey (March 2019). The findings indicate a relationship between social media posts about a political candidate and that candidate's level of name recognition. The results of this study provide useful contributions to the emerging field of digital literacy research. Particularly, this study offers insight into Americans' confidence levels in identifying political posts from political advertisements and their knowledge about how and why they see political posts in their social media feeds.

Keywords: digital literacy, social media algorithms, election campaigns, social media advertising

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that while Americans are increasingly using social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage in political issues and election campaigns, the majority of Americans still do not use social media for these purposes. However, with the growing sophistication of algorithms and micro-targeted advertising, even social media users who do not follow politics on social media may see political campaign posts and advertising in their news feeds. This paper explores who is seeing political posts on social media and what, if any, impacts these posts have on their opinions. It uses the upcoming 2020 Democratic primaries as a case study to determine which social media users are seeing posts and ads from candidates in their social media feeds, and the impact this has on the candidate's name recognition and favorability. It builds off of and compares findings from the Pew Research Center's 2016 study entitled "The Political Environment on Social Media" and explores the implications these findings have for political campaigns, digital literacy, and democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media permeates the lives of Americans — according to the Pew Research Center (2018a), approximately 69% of Americans have at least one social media profile. This literature review will explore how the connection between social media and politics has been studied in the past, as well

as some of the risks and threats that have emerged as the result of social media's largely unregulated existence.

Social Media and Politics

With the ability for users to generate content freely, social media platforms are home to a wide range of topics and discussions, from popular media to breaking news to political debates. In 2016, the Pew Research Center conducted a key study, "The Political Environment on Social Media," to explore how Americans were engaging in politics on social media platforms. Two types of engagement emerged: active engagement, where users are participating via comments, posts, and discussions, and passive engagement, where users are simply following other accounts that are actively engaged. As social media platforms have grown, additional features have been added that complicate this engagement, such as algorithms and advertising that push content onto users' feeds regardless of whether or not they chose to follow that content.

Though the majority of survey respondents encountered political posts on social media platforms, Pew's study found that nearly seven-in-ten participants indicated that they hardly ever (30%) or never (38%) used platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage in politics. Nearly twice as many social media users said that they were "worn out" by the amount of political content they see in their feeds (37%) as the number that said they like seeing lots of political information on social media (20%). These findings raise questions about whether social media users see political content in their feeds even if they do not want to, and what, if any, impact this has on a user's feelings about political issues or candidates. The Pew study did find that one-in-five participants had changed their minds about a political candidate or a social issue because of material they encountered on social media, and a slight majority (54%) felt that social media could help people learn what political candidates are like very or somewhat well. About a quarter of social media users said that they followed political figures online.

Social media has become an appealing and easily accessible resource for researchers on a variety of topics, as it offers a "real-time, readily available data source with which to introspect the behavior of society at large" (Huberty, 2013, p. 1). Particularly in politics, social media platforms like Twitter have become a popular medium for forecasting offline political behavior using visible online behavior. As an information-push medium, Huberty argues, tweets promise an unvarnished, unstructured look into individuals' political attitudes. However, social media as a research source is still a relatively new area of study, and while open social media platforms like Twitter offer researchers an appealing opportunity to easily collect data from a large sample size, the representativeness of these types of platforms remains in question.

In a study conducted by Huberty (2013) on multi-cycle forecasting of Congressional elections on Twitter, the findings showed that Twitter sentiment might correlate with political polling, but still offered weak predictive power for actual election outcomes. One reason for this is the demographic differences between the Twitter user base and the American voter population. Pew's research found that while 88% of 18-29 year-olds use some form of social media, that share falls to 78% among those aged 30-49, 64% for ages 50-64, and only 37% for Americans 65 and older (Pew Research Center, 2018a). As indicated in Pew's findings above, even the majority of Americans that are on social media do not use the platforms to engage in politics. Therefore, while social

media is still home to robust political discussions and sentiment, the audience is not necessarily representative of the entire voting population.

Social Media Advertising and Algorithms

Despite the representation issues, the affordability of social media and the vast amounts of personal data these platforms collect has given social media an important role in the circulation of ideas about public policy and politics. Before studying the use of social media in political discussion, it is important to understand what social media is and how it works. Wooley and Howard (2016) identify three key components of social media. First is the information infrastructure, which refers to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that are used to produce and distribute content. Second is the content itself, which takes the digital form of personal messages, news and ideas that become cultural products. The third is the people, organizations and industries that produce and consume these platforms and content. It is the existence of these three components together that makes social media the powerful tool that it is today.

According to the definition above, social media platforms would not be successful if people didn't engage with the content on them. Even though social media platforms are free for the end-user, it is this engagement that allows social media companies like Facebook to profit. "Engaging," in the context of social media, means interacting with content – whether through views, likes, comments, sharing, or saving posts. Kim (2017) writes that the longer a user stays engaged, the more exposure advertisements receive, and thus the more revenue the social media companies generate. Therefore, to make money, social media companies need to understand what a user wants to see on their platform. They do this by using algorithms to comb through the enormous amounts of data generated through social media users' actions and identify what will be of interest to the end-user. On social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, content and featured posts that appear in users' feeds are run by dedicated algorithms that are either tailored to a user's past digital behavior (likes, comments, post engagement) or to an advertiser's needs, who pay large sums of money to be featured (Unver, 2017).

The power of algorithms and advertising on social media, Unver (2017) argues, puts technology companies at the center of political information-seeking and agenda-setting, two fundamental processes of democracy. Thanks to algorithms, political messaging that users "like" and engage with, including political figures they support, leads to the appearance of similar figures and messages online. Unver writes that this then leads to self-generated and algorithmically supported "filter bubbles." Since social media users are so bombarded with information overload, they often rely on heuristics, sharing what like-minded friends share without paying too much attention to the source of the content or the intentions behind it. These filter bubbles can lead to certain risks that are outlined in the next section of this literature review.

With respect to how social media users feel about their data being used, a Pew Research Center study (2018b) found that across age groups, social media users were comfortable with their data being used for some purposes, like recommending events or shopping deals, but were wary of it being used for political messaging. A substantial majority of users felt that it was not acceptable for social media platforms to use their data to deliver messages from political campaigns, with 31% saying this was not acceptable at all. Despite this, political candidates widely make use of

social media platforms and their advertising capabilities, which allows them to target their advertising to potential voters. According to a congressional hearing of Facebook, presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton spent a total of $81 million on Facebook advertising alone leading up to the 2016 election (Wagner, 2017).

Broockman and Green (2014) argue that social media offers an ideal venue for political advertising because it is a cost-effective persuasion tactic, given the ads' very low price and the ability to target by demographics. The demographic characteristics available on websites like Facebook are also present in voter files, campaign finance reports, and many other publicly available registers of individuals, forming a bridge between the targeting of online advertising and public lists. As the use of social media advertising increases in political campaigns, so too do the risks that are associated with it.

Risks

The impact of this use of social media on offline political engagement and action is still debated. A literature review conducted by Shah et al. in 2007 highlighted the two different arguments that have existed since the birth of the Internet. On one side, there is research that suggests that information uses of the Internet can encourage community involvement and participation at levels that rival traditional newspapers and media, while the other side contends that traditional mass media still plays a much more important role in democratic citizenship. These arguments relate back to the demographic statistics mentioned above. While social media is becoming increasingly popular amongst all age groups, older demographics are less likely to be on the platforms, and those that are using the platforms do not necessarily do so to engage in politics. In that sense, traditional media and the face-to-face connection remains an important part of America's political landscape.

Still, the increased use of social media by candidates and voters alike has highlighted the potential risks of using these unregulated platforms to engage in politics. Shah et al. found in their research that social media users tended to craft an "information environment" (referred to as "filter bubbles" by Unver, 2017) on the Internet that reflected their own political predispositions. As early as 2007, these authors were cautioning that this could potentially lead to less political tolerance and ultimately increased polarization – issues that gained the attention of the public during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign.

Since 2016, the risks of social media and its algorithms and advertising have been widely publicized with news stories about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election campaign and the significant data breach by Cambridge Analytica, who used Facebook data to target campaign ads. A term that has become popularized as a result of these events is "fake news." Like Shah (2007) and Unver (2017), Alcott and Gentzkow (2017) argue that the growth of online news in the early 2000s created an excess diversity of viewpoints that made it easier for like-minded citizens to form "echo chambers" where they would be insulated from contrary perspectives. Now, the authors write, the focus of concern has shifted to social media, where content can be relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. This method of content-sharing leads to the creation and dissemination of what is now known as "fake news."

"Fake news" has become so common that the World Economic Forum recently identified the rapid spread of misinformation online as among the top ten perils to society (Howard et al. 2017). Specifically, on social media, the spread of fake news is aided by something called "bots." Howard et al. define bots as pieces of software that perform simple, repetitive tasks. These tasks can be legitimate, like delivering news and information, or malicious, like spamming, harassment, and hate speech. Bots on social media can rapidly deploy messages, replicate themselves, and pass as human users. Howard et al. studied the use of fake political posts and bots during the 2016 election campaign, finding that U.S. Twitter users shared conspiracy or fake content the same amount (20%) as they shared professional news. Notably, they also found that the number of links to Russian news stories, unverified links to WikiLeaks pages, or junk news was greater than the number of links to professional researched and published news. Many of the swing states getting highly concentrated doses of polarizing content were also among those with a large number of votes in the Electoral College, suggesting that bots specifically targeted them to influence election results.

An exploration of bots on social media shows that they run rampant on platforms like Twitter. Wooley and Howard (2016) found that bots makeup nearly 50% of all online traffic and account for a significant portion of active users on the most popular social media platforms. On Twitter, for instance, approximately 30 million active accounts are bot-driven, mimicking human users and producing copious amounts of information onto the platforms. These authors argue that the pervasive use of these human-software hybrids, and the obscure and often discriminatory nature of the algorithms behind them, threaten to undermine the political potential of social media systems. However, Wooley and Howard (2016) note, for bots to be successful, they must have a significant amount of social, temporal, and monetary capital behind them. Research has shown that monetizing engagement – such as likes, comments and retweets – tends to be most successful with emotionally-charged, extreme content. Trolls leverage this by producing such content, whether or not it has merit or facts behind it. What bots do, Unver (2017) writes, is increase troll effects exponentially, bombarding users with larger volumes of fake or manipulated content. As this is still a relatively new risk to the field of social media study, more research is needed to determine the influence of bots and how they can be prevented.

Digital Literacy

The growing use of social media to engage in political discussions and for politicians to use as a campaign platform showcases the increasing need for digital media literacy. Koltay (2011) defines media literacy as "the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts" (p. 213). The study of media literacy emerged decades ago with the rise of print and televised advertising, and much of the literature, including that definition, is from the late 1990s. Media literacy education has made its way into the schools but primarily targets children and youth. The rise of fake news and false advertising, as discussed in the previous section of this literature review, has ignited a growing demand for better digital literacy in both children and adults alike. Digital literacy is defined by Cornell University (2015) as the ability to find, evaluate, utilize, share, and create content using information technologies and the Internet. These technologies include but are not limited to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

The proliferation of fake news, data breaches, and election interference online highlights the importance of understanding the state of digital literacy in America and the impact that social media features like algorithms and advertising may be inadvertently or intentionally having on potential voters. This study contributes to the field of digital literacy research by exploring the use of political posts and advertisements about political candidates, how social media users see this content, and whether or not social media users recognize where the content they're seeing is coming from. This study builds off of Pew's "The Political Environment on Social Media" report to determine whether more people are now using social media to engage in politics, and how many people are following political candidates on these platforms.

In terms of digital literacy research, this is a relatively new field, and ways to study it effectively are still being explored. The use of online surveys is becoming increasingly popular in survey research due to its low cost and ease of use for researchers, but Chang and Vowles (2013) argue that online surveying, as with many other methods, has the disadvantage of selection/sampling bias. Since frequent Internet users are likely very different than infrequent or non-users, some potential respondents might not be reachable via the Internet. Therefore, they write, online surveys are typically more appropriate for experienced Internet users and tend to capture younger populations. On the other hand, traditional Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) survey methods tend to capture older populations, as IVR callers are only able to reach landlines. An imperfect solution to this dilemma has emerged: mixed-mode research that uses a combination of IVR and online surveys to reach a broader population. This survey uses this mixed-mode methodology, and the outcomes of reaching different age groups are discussed below. Based on the findings outlined in this literature review, three research questions were designed for this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: Do Facebook and Twitter users who do not use these platforms to engage in politics still see political content on their social media feeds?

RQ2: Are social media users who use Facebook and Twitter to engage in politics more likely to be able to recognize the source of the political content they are seeing?

RQ3: Does seeing political content on Facebook and Twitter about specific candidates have any effect on the candidate's name recognition?

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through a national survey using a mixed-mode methodology via Interactive Voice Recognition and Amazon Turk. The survey was designed for participants who use at least one of the two most common social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter. These two platforms were selected based on Pew's 2016 study, which found that an identical share of Facebook users and Twitter users reported that they frequently encountered political posts and engaged in political discussions among the people in their networks.

The survey was distributed to a national audience through Emerson Polling and was analyzed using SPSS software. The survey instrument was broken up into three sections. The first asked questions about political engagement and social media use, building off of the Pew Research Center's 2016

survey. The definition of political engagement used in this survey was intentionally kept open to be inclusive. The second section asked questions about Democratic candidates and whether survey respondents saw posts about them on social media, and the third section contained a series of demographic questions. The Democratic candidates were selected based on the four candidates polling the highest at the time of the study, March 15-17, 2019, using the aggregate polling site RealClearPolitics.

The total sample size of this poll was 470 participants, with a margin of error of 4.5%. The full sample was weighted by age, gender, and education to make it more representative of the U.S. population, with parameters created using the 2017 American Community 5-Year Survey. The mode was also weighted to have 50% IVR respondents and 50% online. To target social media users, the survey included a screening question that determined that 63% of participants were active on Facebook and/or Twitter, and 37% were not. The majority of the analysis was conducted using the sub-sample of social media users, which consisted of 297 participants with a margin of error of 5.7%.

When comparing age to the screening question, the statistically significant results $\chi 2$ (3, N = 470) = 122.675 p = .000. showed that almost 70% of those who did not use Facebook and Twitter were aged 55 years or older. The sub-sample of this survey, therefore, skewed towards a younger demographic, and also had more female participants than males. The demographic makeup of the full sample and the sub-sample of social media users is below.

Table 1: Demographic Makeup of Samples

Demographic	**Weighted Sample**	**Weighted Sub-Sample**
Gender		
Male	49%	43%
Female	51%	57%
Party		
Democrat	33%	36%
Republican	36%	32%
Independent	28%	29%
Unregistered / Unable to vote	3%	3%
Race / Ethnicity		
Hispanic / Latino	13%	10%

White	72%	76%
Black	5%	6%
Asian	4%	5%
Other / Multiple Races	5%	3%
Age		
18 - 34	30%	39%
35 - 54	33%	43%
55 - 74	29%	16%
75+	8%	2%
Education		
High school or less	39%	33%
Some college	29%	30%
College graduate	20%	26%
Postgraduate	12%	11%

ANALYSIS

In addition to the three research questions posed for this study, the results of this survey offer interesting insights into the political engagement of Americans. Of the 37% of participants who did not use Facebook or Twitter and were therefore screened out of the main analysis, a vast majority appeared to be politically engaged. 93% voted in the last presidential election, and 88% are at least somewhat likely to vote in 2020. Of the sub-sample of those who did use social media, a smaller majority (80%) voted in the 2016 election, but the same percentage (88%) are planning on voting in 2020. As 39% of the sub-sample were aged 18-34, it is possible that some participants were not eligible to vote in 2016.

Looking at the social media users in the sub-sample, it appears that there is an increase in political engagement on social media compared to Pew's research study in 2016.

Table 2. How often do you use [Facebook or Twitter] to engage in politics or political discussions?

Often	72 (25%)
Occasionally	86 (29%)
Rarely	83 (28%)
Never	48 (16%)
Not sure	6 (2%)

This study found that more than half (54%) of social media users used Facebook or Twitter to engage in politics at least occasionally. In 2016, Pew found that 30% of social media users rarely used social media to 'comment, discuss, or post about politics or government'; these results show a similar number of 28% who rarely use social media to engage in politics. However, compared to Pew's 38% of participants who said they never used social media to engage, this study found only 16% who never did. Therefore, it does appear that using social media to engage in politics is becoming increasingly popular.

Pew's study also found that about 1 in 4 participants followed a political candidate online. In this study, an average of 17% of participants followed at least one of the politicians asked about in the survey. The four Democratic candidates had an average of 12% of participants following them, while President Trump had 29%.

RQ1**:** Do Facebook and Twitter users who *do not* use these platforms to engage in politics still see political content in their social media feeds?

Table 3. Political Posts

	See often	See occasionally	See rarely	Never see
Engage often	46 (64%)	22 (30%)	4 (5%)	0 (0%)
Engage occasionally	43 (51%)	25 (29%)	17 (19%)	0 (0%)
Engage rarely	41 (49%)	29 (35%)	11 (13%)	2 (2%)
Never engage	15 (31%)	24 (49%)	2 (5%)	7 (15%)
Not sure	2 (35%)	1 (8%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)

As noted above, the results found that a slight majority of participants use social media to engage in politics often or occasionally. However, a significant majority of participants (84%) said that they see political posts in their social media feeds often (50%) or occasionally (34%). Almost half of those who said they rarely use social media to engage in politics said that they still often see political posts on their feed, and 35% said they see them occasionally. For those who said they never used social media to engage in politics, 31% said they saw political posts often, while half said they saw them occasionally. This relationship between the level of engagement and amount of posts seen was found to be statistically significant $\chi 2$ (16, N = 297) = 98.547 p = .000.

Table 4: Political Ads

	See often	See occasionally	See rarely	Never see
Engage often	22 (31%)	27 (38%)	18 (25%)	3 (4%)
Engage occasionally	15 (17%)	42 (49%)	21 (25%)	5 (6%)
Engage rarely	18 (22%)	40 (48%)	15 (18%)	8 (10%)
Never engage	10 (20%)	18 (37%)	14 (29%)	7 (14%)
Not sure	13 (47%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)

Additionally, a majority (67%) of participants also saw political ads in their feeds, though less often and more occasionally. However, those who do not use social media to engage in politics are seeing political ads less than they see political posts. Only 22% of those who rarely engage and 20% who never engage said they often see political ads in their feeds. A larger number, 49% of those who rarely engage and 37% who never engage, said they saw ads occasionally.

RQ2: Are those who use Facebook and Twitter to engage in politics more likely to be able to recognize the source of the political content they see?

In terms of digital literacy, some questions were included in the survey to allow respondents to self-identify their level of digital literacy. In particular, they were asked how confident they were about their ability to differentiate political posts from political ads. The results showed that 44% of participants felt that they were very confident, and 49% were somewhat confident. Only 7% said they were not very confident or not confident.

Table 5: How confident do you feel about your ability to recognize the difference between a political post on social media and a political advertisement on social media?

	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not very confident	Not confident
Engage often	40 (56%)	30 (42%)	2 (2%)	0
Engage occasionally	30 (35%)	47 (55%)	9 (11%)	0
Engage rarely	33 (40%)	44 (53%)	5 (7%)	0
Never engage	21 (44%)	23 (48%)	2 (4%)	2 (5%)
Not sure	5 (81%)	1 (7%)	1 (12%)	0

There was no significant difference between the level of engagement in politics on social media and the participants' confidence level in recognizing political posts versus political ads, though only those who engaged in politics often had a majority of participants say that they were very confident. There was also no significant difference found between different demographics. The results indicated that males were more like to say that they were very confident as opposed to somewhat, as were Republicans and Independents. There was an even distribution of confidence across education levels and age levels, though the age group 55-74 were more likely to say they were "somewhat confident" as opposed to "very confident."

In addition to self-identifying, there were a few other results that can help shed some light on digital literacy levels. For example, an average of 10% of respondents said that they were "not sure" whether or not they saw posts about a candidate, and an average of 5% of participants were "not sure" about the source of the posts they saw. Consistently, participants were the most confident about whether or not they followed a candidate on social media, and the least confident about whether or not they saw a sponsored ad.

RQ3: Does seeing content on Facebook and Twitter about political candidates have any impact on those candidates' name recognition?

Table 6: Overall, do you feel your experience with seeing political posts on social media has had any effect on your favorability of the candidates?

Significant effect	34 (12%)
Minor effect	114 (39%)
Neutral or not sure	87 (29%)
No effect	61 (21%)

As with digital literacy, this survey asked participants to self-identify whether or not they felt that seeing political content on their social media feeds had any effect on their favorability of political candidates. The results showed that a small majority (51%) felt that it did, with 39% saying it had a minor effect and 12% saying it had a significant effect. In this question, the age demographic was found to be statistically significant $\chi 2$ (9, N = 294) = 31.147 p = .000. The majority of older people ages 55 and up were either neutral or not sure about political posts' impact on the favorability of candidates. In contrast, 52% of 18-34 year-olds and 57% of 34-54 year-olds felt it had at least a minor effect. Party registration was also statistically significant $\chi 2$ (9, N = 295) = 41.054p = .000. Democrats were almost twice as likely to feel that political posts had a significant effect on their favorability compared to Republicans and Independents (18% vs. 8%).

Table 7: 2020 Democratic Primaries

Social Media	**Name Recognition**	**Favorability**
1. Bernie Sanders (67%)	Bernie Sanders (98%)	Joe Biden (59%)
2. Elizabeth Warren (55%)	Joe Biden (97%)	Bernie Sanders (51%)
3. Joe Biden (43%)	Elizabeth Warren (88%)	Elizabeth Warren (40%)
4. Kamala Harris (39%)	Kamala Harris (73%)	Kamala Harris (35%)

In terms of the four Democratic candidates used as a case study, the results largely aligned with what was showing in the polls at the time. Kamala Harris had the lowest percentage (38%) of participants seeing posts about her on social media, and also had the lowest name recognition at 28% of respondents selecting "never heard of." Bernie Sanders ranked highest on the social media question at 67%, but participants are divided on his favorability. Even though Joe Biden had a much lower social media score (43%), his favorability was eight points higher than Bernie Sanders. Overall, there appeared to be a correlation between social media posts and name recognition, except for Joe Biden. This anomaly is discussed in the next section of this paper.

The name recognition results appeared in line with the average poll results at the time of the study. Interestingly, it appears that Bernie Sanders is campaigning most heavily on social media, with 30% of respondents seeing sponsored posts about him, compared to 20% for Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris. Joe Biden had not launched his campaign at the time of this study, though 16% of participants still said they saw a sponsored ad about him.

Participants were also asked the same questions about President Trump. The results found that 17% of participants who voted for him in 2016 indicated they had an unfavorable opinion of him now, as did 81% of those who voted for 'someone else' and 64% who did not vote. 31% of Trump voters do not follow him on social media. These results were found to be statistically significant $\chi 2$ (9, N = 297) = 55.225 p = .000.

DISCUSSION

In comparison to Pew's 2016 study, these results indicate that the use of social media platforms to engage in politics continues to be on the rise. A higher majority of participants in this survey used social media to engage in politics often or occasionally, compared to the study done by Pew. While the average percentage of participants following a politician on social media was lower, this is not a direct comparison because this study only asked about specific candidates and President Trump, rather than politicians as a whole.

The findings for RQ1 shows that those who do not use social media to engage in politics still see political posts in their feeds. This finding is important to note because, as discussed in the literature review, nearly twice as many social media users are worn out by the amount of political content they see in their feeds as those who like seeing lots of political information (Pew Research Center, 2016). The survey results also showed that the majority of social media users saw political ads in their feed, even if they did not use the platforms to engage in politics. However, those who were not engaged were more likely to see posts than advertisements, a finding that can be explained by the research done on algorithms and advertising. Ads are primarily driven by algorithms and set by advertisers who have a target audience in mind, while posts come from several organic sources. Future studies in this area could dive deeper into the sources of these organic posts. For example, a post could appear in a person's social media feed because a friend posted it or a news organization posted a story, but also because a friend liked or comment on a post, and the algorithm pushed that content into the viewer's feed.

Based on the findings of RQ2, it appears that Americans are fairly digitally literate when it comes to recognizing posts on social media versus ads on social media. However, although the majority of participants said that they were very confident in their ability to recognize posts from ads, this was the answer that had the least confidence when asked how they saw a post. Joe Biden had almost the same percentage of people saying they had seen political ads about him even though his campaign had not launched at the time of this survey. Surprisingly, there were no differences across age or education levels in terms of social media literacy. However, it is important to note that these findings relied heavily on self-reporting, and further testing is needed to confirm. The need for accurate research into digital literacy issues is discussed in the Limitations and Considerations section. It is also worth noting that participants may have learned the difference

between posts and advertisements on social media through other means aside from political engagement, such as shopping online.

Lastly, the case study used for RQ3 provides some insight into the current 2020 Democratic primary race. Based on the survey results, the candidates were ranked from highest to lowest in terms of the number of participants who saw posts about them on social media, the number of participants who recognized their name, and which candidate had the highest favorability amongst participants. Consistently, Kamala Harris was in the last place, followed by Elizabeth Warren, except for social media posts. Elizabeth Warren scored higher than Joe Biden when it came to social media posts but had lower name recognition and favorability.
Joe Biden ranked in the first or second place for both favorability and name recognition but ranked third for social media posts. At the time of the survey, he had not yet announced his candidacy and was therefore not campaigning or receiving the same media attention that other candidates were receiving. He would also not have been running political ads at the time of the survey. His high favorability and name recognition, therefore, likely came from his previous position as Vice President of the United States. It would be important to take both external context and current media coverage into account when studying social media prevalence during election campaigns.

In terms of favorability, the results are consistent with the polls except for Kamala Harris, who was polling better than Elizabeth Warren but had significantly lower name recognition. While Kamala Harris had the lowest scores, there was only a three-point difference in her favorability/unfavorability ranking compared to Elizabeth Warren's eight points. These results suggest that social media could be used as a relatively accurate gauge for broader political polling, but considerations need to be taken into account. These limitations and considerations are discussed in the next section of this paper.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Several limitations in this survey should be taken into consideration when studying this topic in the future.

First, the mixed-mode IVR/online model was used to reach a wide range of age demographics. The majority (70%) of those aged 55 and up were screened out of the survey because they did not use social media platforms. However, we know from the Pew Research Center that 64% of 50-64 year-olds and 37% of those 65+ are using social media. While the age groups and social media platforms varied slightly from this survey's focus, it is clear that there is an older generation of social media users that were not reached through this survey. For the field of digital literacy, reaching the older generations is especially important because, unlike younger generations, they did not grow up with the Internet and may need additional education and training to reduce the risks described in this paper. It is also worth noting that of the 37% of respondents who were screened out of this survey because they were not on social media, the vast majority were still politically engaged. This highlights the potential value of a mixed-mode methodology of online and telephone to reach the broadest possible range of ages, however imperfect the methodology may be.

Second, additional research could be conducted into how social media users see posts in their feeds. This survey asked about three circumstances: whether they followed the candidate, whether a person they followed posted about that candidate, and whether they saw a social media advertisement about that candidate. The second category could be further expanded to include: whether a news organization posted a story about that candidate, whether a person they followed shared (or retweeted on Twitter) someone else's post about that candidate, whether a person they followed simply 'liked' a post about that candidate and the like showed up in their feed, etc. As social media platforms become more robust and feature-heavy, more considerations will need to be made to determine how social media posts get seen.

Further experiments could be conducted to determine whether people are confident with recognizing an ad compared to a post. This becomes increasingly complicated with social media algorithms that push not only posts that people write or share but also posts that people like, comment on, or a friend of a friend shared. While it appears from these results that the vast majority of social media users feel at least somewhat confident in their digital literacy skills, the spread of fake news and false information discussed in the literature review suggests otherwise. In addition, this survey is largely missing the perspectives of a significant age demographic who has grown up in a world without the Internet and thus may be naturally less digitally literate than younger generations.

Lastly, these findings illuminate some of the limitations of using social media for political purposes in general. Although political engagement on social media is on the rise, there remains a subset of the population that either does not use social media at all or does not use it to engage in politics. Likely, this population falls into the group mentioned by Shah et al. (2007), who still prefer to engage through traditional media or face-to-face interaction. For political candidates, they would be wise to integrate social media into their existing, on-the-ground campaign strategy to ensure the broadest possible reach of the voter population. For social media users, the risks associated with political campaigning and advertising online highlight the growing need for digital literacy education and training across all demographics.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that social media has the potential to provide researchers with a vast amount of potentially useful data, and that the Internet has opened up the field of survey research to make it more affordable and accessible for many. With the use of social media for political engagement purposes on the rise, the opportunities for this field of research are abundant. However, more work needs to be done to ensure survey samples are representative of the general population, and that all demographics are being adequately reached.

For political candidates, it does appear that the prevalence of candidates on social media platforms has some impact on name recognition and that the favorability of social media users is generally reflective of the national polls. However, some key findings should be noted by political candidates as they explore their strategies for social media use. First, the majority of social media users see political posts and advertisements in their feeds regardless of interest. Second, a slight majority of users feel that seeing political posts about candidates has at least a minor effect on their favorability of candidates. And third, Pew found that a significant majority of people do not want social media

platforms to use their data to deliver messages from political campaigns. Therefore, social media offers up enticing opportunities for political campaigns, but these opportunities must be explored carefully and strategically.

Lastly, it is clear from the literature review that digital literacy is more important than ever. To achieve digital literacy, we must expand media literacy education beyond the schools and make an effort to educate the older generations who are using Internet technologies, including social media, but have not grown up in the digital age. With the prevalence of fake news and the ongoing attempts to use social media to influence elections, knowing how and why we see the posts that we see in our social media feeds is imperative for any generation.

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QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BUSINESS DISCIPLINES

February 2020

Volume 6
Number 4

A JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF BUSINESS DISCIPLINES
SPONSORED BY UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA
ISSN 2334-0169 (print)
ISSN 2329-5163 (online)