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POLITICAL EXPRESSION ON FACEBOOK IN A CONTEXT OF CONFLICT: DILEMMAS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF JEWISH-ISRAELI YOUTH

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Introduction

Social media and Facebook in particular embody a complex and challenging context for impression management, particularly when it comes to political expression. The Israeli case presents a unique context in which to examine these challenges, as Jewish-Israeli youth are embedded in a divided society involved in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A thematic content analysis of 15 in-depth interviews with Jewish-Israeli students who are regular Facebook users revealed distinct dilemmas. Jewish-Israeli youth are highly motivated to discuss politics on Facebook, while also aware of social risks involved in such discussion. They thus adopt unique coping strategies in which political expression is an integral part in the delicate act of impression management.

One of the aims of this research has been to complement existing work on youth's political expression on Facebook, embedded mostly in a U.S. context, with a different cultural and socio-political context. The Israeli case is uniquely situated as a telling comparison case. In contrast to the American context where often political conversations are avoided (Eliasoph, 1998), in the divided Israeli society, politics plays a salient role in people's lives (Hammack, 2011; Maoz, 2006; Rosenberg & Maoz, 2012) and political topics are hotly

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debated. Moreover, Israeli society is characterized by different speech norms and different perceptions of the appropriateness of political talk.

Method

The research was conducted in 2014, at a period of relative calm in the general context of conflict in Israel. A public call for interviewees was posted on the Facebook account of the first author, asking her own Facebook network to share the post widely. This technique followed the logic of snowball sampling, approaching several interviewees and using their social connections in order to reach a larger pool of potential participants (Atkinson and Flint, 2011).

We have conducted and analyzed 15 semi-structured interviews with 23-29 year-old Jewish-Israeli interviewees (7 female and 8 male, M_{age} = 26.7, S.D. = 1.7). The Interviews were conducted in Hebrew, generally in the interviewees' local cafés or at their homes and lasted 45 – 100 minutes. The analysis was based on the Grounded Theory approach, focusing on the production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Our aim was to understand the phenomenon as our respondents understand it. Through iterative coding, we grouped concepts together into categories, which provided the structure for the following paper. Within different categories, sub-categories were identified, to provide further clarification and specification (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Finally, we connected the emerging themes and categories to concepts and questions emerging from the literature.

Findings

Our analysis revealed the following main themes:

1. *Impression management on Facebook: Between the personal and the political*

In line with previous research (Joinson, 2008; DeAndrea & Walther, 2011) our findings indicate that our interviewees hold multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations for using Facebook. The personal and social motivations and needs of being liked, gaining or maintaining popularity and managing interactions often clash with the motivation for political expression through Facebook.

2. *Motivations for political posting: From self-expression to discussion and persuasion*

In the U.S. context, recent work found students devising complex strategies to effectively “avoid politics,” (Eliasoph, 1998) including self-censorship,

neutrality and use of humor (Thorson et al., 2015). For Israeli interviewees, political expression took a much more central position, as a vehicle for voicing opinions, receiving updates on the political realm, and creating an image of themselves as knowledgeable, opinionated participants in political life.

3. The risks of political expression in a highly divided society in conflict

Notwithstanding the desirability of political content on Facebook, posting political content may raise undesired reactions. According to Jang et al. (2014), having a large number of Facebook friends increases the possibility of high divergence in political views, and decreases the potential of a productive political discussion. Further, consistent with John and Dvir's (2015) findings, our interviewees are aware that posting political content holds risks: disappointing family members, ending friendships specifically weak tie friendships) and even damaging future career opportunities. This risk is apparently salient not only in times of an extreme eruption of conflict, but also in calmer times of routine, that are still embedded in the context of a divided society in an intractable conflict.

4. How to go about posting politics: Coping strategies and practices

According to our findings our interviewees are considerably motivated to express political content on Facebook, while being well aware of the risks and challenges involved in such acts in the context of their divisive socio-political reality. The interviewees are familiar with Facebook’s privacy tools and use them regularly, but see them as insufficient to guard them from risks. To counter this apparent weakness of Facebook's privacy tools the interviewees tend to adopt alternative, behavioral strategies. Consequently, they describe four main strategies for dealing with dilemmas related to posting politics: restricting access to some posts or all of them; phrasing the message vaguely or softening radical views; sharing or liking content by other people or pages instead of articulating their own posts; and finally, using humor to diffuse political tension.

Discussion

The use of behavioral strategies to overcome the challenges of political expression on Facebook is thus common for both Israeli and American youth. But unlike the American students, the youth in this project did not employ these strategies to *avoid* politics, but rather to enable and support their political expression, in the face of the challenges and risks of such an endeavor. Making such cultural comparisons can help parse out which characteristics of political expression on Facebook are culturally dependent, and which are more universally shared, arising from the affordances and constraints of the Facebook platform. This research extends our understanding of Facebook as a platform for expressing political content in

divided societies, characterized by considerable internal and external conflict as well as high levels of political involvement.

Conclusion

Given the central role of political expression for democracy (Dewey, 1927), we can be encouraged by young Jewish-Israelis' strong motivation to express themselves politically on Facebook. In this highly divided, yet close-knit society, social media platforms are a site for young people to negotiate their social goals with their political expression. In the Israeli case, the result of this negotiation is not an avoidance of political talk, but rather a finely tuned act of impression management, in which having a prominent political voice contributes to, rather than undermines one's positive self-presentation.

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