

THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND THE POLITICAL VIEWS OF RUSSIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN GLASGOW

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ABSTRACT

Social media has power to influence politics, as shown by the Arab Spring, Donald Trump's election, and Brexit. In Russia, similar concerns have been raised about the political impact of official censorship and government-funded disinformation campaigns on the largest Russian social media platform, VKontakte. In a time of increased scrutiny of social media's role in polarising political discourse, this study takes a deeper look at the relationship between social media use and political views. In particular, this study seeks to evaluate this relationship in the context of migrants, which remains previously unexplored. Through 12 semi-structured interviews, this study examines the experiences of Russian university students in Glasgow regarding social media use and political views. The results showed that Facebook can act as a tool for learning political norms. In turn, it found that negative Russian stereotypes and ill-informed portrayals on Facebook steered Russians to use VKontakte or other Russian services for news regarding Russia. At the same time, it was found that a lack of data security and self-censorship on VKontakte can drive users away from the platform in favour of Facebook. Overall, this study highlights the importance of considering the different ways in which social networking services can impact political views.

INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, it was reported that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica had been harvesting Facebook user data to influence politics, drawing attention to the divisive nature of social media (The Guardian, 2020). Donald Trump's election and Brexit were both perceived, by some, as a result of voters being manipulated by targeted political advertisement (Cadwalladr, 2019). The power of social media to influence politics, once again, became the subject of public scrutiny. In the early 2010s when the political implications of social media use were widely discussed, the Arab Spring sparked debates about its democratising power (Cottle, 2011; Shirky, 2011). However, in the more recent debate, social media's power to promote pro-government, conservative views was scrutinised. In Russia, similar concerns have been raised by the public and independent media about the political impact of official censorship and government-funded disinformation campaigns on the largest Russian social media platform, VKontakte (also known as VK). With the power to influence political outcomes, social media has significant implications for the future of political campaigns and how internet users navigate online space that requires further investigation. The Russian government has been shown to hold significant sway over traditional forms of media through regulatory laws, technological attacks, and financial manipulations (Mejias and Vokuev, 2017; Soldatov, 2017; Kravchenko, 2019), and this influence extends to social media as well.

VKontakte is the top social networking service in Russia (Statista, 2020), and is often referred to as 'the Russian Facebook' in Western media (The Guardian, 2013; Gerken and Sharkov, 2019). VKontakte and another popular Russian social media platform, Odnoklassniki, belong to a subset of the internet dubbed RuNet. RuNet refers to Russian-language websites and internet services, which are accessible to Russian-speaking internet users who do not know other languages

(Akademik, 2009). Once VKontakte gained popularity in Russia, it became even more difficult for similar services, such as Facebook, to overtake VKontakte despite their popularity overseas because Russian users would be attracted to services their friends are already using (Baran and Stock, 2015: 41). Aside from extensive self-censoring on the platform, due to fear of government reprisals, VKontakte users have been arrested for posting insensitive and 'extremist' memes making fun of religion (Kravchenko, 2019: 181). Moreover, during the war in East Ukraine, the Russian government was reportedly associated with a disinformation campaign on VKontakte: fake social media accounts with no history appeared on the website, posting videos and images from theatre performances, films, and unrelated news reports and claiming these to be evidence of human rights abuses committed by the Ukrainian army (Mejias and Vokuev, 2017: 1033). Hence, significant governmental influence over social media makes it important to examine what impact this can have on individual political views.

Past research has shown differences in the political awareness of Facebook and VKontakte users. Conducted in the wake of the Russian political protests in 2011, Reuter and Szakonyi found that Facebook and Twitter users in Russia were more aware of fraudulent practices in the 2011 legislative election than users of VKontakte and Odnoklassniki (2013). This study suggested that this may be due to political opponents being able to post more information related to election fraud and government corruption on Facebook and Twitter than on Russian domestic services. Although it remains unclear if this influenced voting behaviour, this study highlights how governmental influence over social media has the power to shape political views of its users.

In previous research comparing Facebook and VKontakte use and political views, the subjects are often ethnic Russians who lived the majority of their lives outside Russia, or Russian nationals living in Russia (Baran and Stock, 2015; Zhao, S.,

Shchekoturov, A. V. & Shchekoturova, S. D, 2017; Karamalak and Pozhidaeva, 2019). There have been limited investigations into the experience of Russian migrants. Migration can often change the way people use media and social media, which can then impact on a migrant's political perception and adaptation (Tai, 2016; Gomes, 2018; Yang, 2018). Therefore, examining the social media experience of Russian migrants may not only provide further insights into the relationship between social media use and political views but also how migration can shift these patterns, which has not yet been investigated.

The present study examines the interrelation between Facebook and VKontakte use and the political views of Russian university students in Glasgow. This research asked: (1) What are the perceived effects of VKontakte or Facebook use on the participants' political views? And (2) how do the participants feel about the content and service they receive from VKontakte and Facebook, and how does this affect their decision to use, or not use, either site?

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected as part of my undergraduate dissertation. The project was approved by the School of Social and Political Sciences Undergraduates Ethics Committee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with 12 Russian students from the University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, and Glasgow Caledonian University. University students studying in Glasgow who consider themselves 'Russian' were recruited online through the Glasgow University Russian-speaking Society. The snowballing method was then used to recruit other participants.

Rather than quantifying students' experiences and/or opinions, a qualitative methodology was used to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of Russian students in Glasgow and how they explore the dynamic world of political content and discourse online. The interviewees all hold or have held Russian citizenship and stated that they think of themselves as Russian. Five participants either emigrated out of Russia years before they arrived in Glasgow or grew up between Russia and another country. Despite this, the five participants maintain social ties with friends and family back in Russia, as well as with the Russian community abroad, and travel back to Russia frequently. To protect the identity of individuals, all names that appear in this research are pseudonyms. The author conducted the interview by first asking about the social media use pattern of the participants before discussing the perceived relations between the participants' social media use and their political views by the participants.

Table 1: List of Pseudonyms and Social Media Usages

Pseudonym	Gender	Social Media
Dimitri	Male	Prefer Facebook
Pavel	Male	Both
Ivan	Male	Both
Alexei	Male	Prefer Facebook
Anastasia	Female	Prefer Facebook
Vera	Female	Both
Anna	Female	Both
Oleg	Male	Prefer VKontakte
Valery	Male	Both
Vitaly	Male	Prefer VKontakte
Victoria	Female	Both
Tatiana	Female	Prefer Facebook

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The author conducted thematic analysis on the transcripts by first carrying out open coding on the text, allowing recurring themes to emerge, before analysing the tone and content of the interviewees' answers based on these themes (Bryman, 2008).

FINDINGS

Social Media as a Tool for Acculturation

Social media can act as a useful tool in the process of second culture-learning, also known as acculturation (Yang, 2018). The results from this study indicate that, in some cases, it helps users understand the political norms of the receiving society: when transient migrants move to a new country, they are often driven to adapt to the social media use patterns of their new acquaintances in the host society (Gomes, 2018: 79-80). Pavel, a study participant, stated 'Facebook isn't a thing that most people in Russia usually have'; a person would usually 'add' Russian people online on VKontakte. While there are no firewalls preventing Russian netizens from adding one another on Facebook, Facebook becomes less desirable in Russia as a result of its low popularity. Similarly, after moving to Scotland and finding that he '[hasn't] really integrated into any Russian community', Pavel '[has] no reason to use VK, so obviously [he'll] use Facebook'. Some interviewees said they use both VKontakte and Facebook with similar intensity and frequency, while others said they use one more than the other, depending on the friends they make offline. Someone like Pavel, who described himself as mostly friends with non-Russians in Scotland, may 'migrate' online from VKontakte to Facebook to complement their offline social migration. On the other hand, Oleg, who has 'more friends there [on VKontakte]', is on Facebook much less than VKontakte and only goes on Facebook to check for local events, rather than for news and entertainment.

Shifts in social media use patterns can also be vital in helping migrants 'integrate' into the receiving society (Gomes, 2018: 90-91). As Valery explained, because his own life can be rather 'small' and limited compared to what is available online, 'most of the things I know about Scotland, I think I got through social media mainly.' It helps him '[complete] the picture of everything, of what's going on'. Vera presented a similar line of thought. She described how reading 'comments on videos and on the post, you can just see how people see different aspects of the world, how would they respond'. These online interactions and observations represent the process of acquiring 'bridging social capital', which helps bridge the cultural gap between migrants and locals (Branco, 2018; Veronis, Tabler & Ahmed, 2018). Knowledge of socio-political norms in the host society helps ease the socio-psychological stress of transnational movement and helps foster a good relationship between the migrant and members of the receiving society (Erdal, 2013). However, this does not mean a migrant has to adopt different political views just to fit in. Dimitri, who has friends with opposing political views, said he would rather not talk about politics online. Because political topics are controversial, he stated it is 'counter-productive' to talk about politics online. Hence, whilst understanding the local political norms can help a person integrate, echoing these opinions is not necessary for the process. As such, despite its use in facilitating acculturation, social media does not always motivate one to change one's political views.

Physical migration and online 'migration'

The current study found that as a migrant's social media use shifts, their experience of the online world changes, which is a significant part of their 'actual' life. When they go from using

one social media site to another, some interviewees said that they started to pay attention to different things. The topics and trends they read and post about change depending on the social circle they enter, in which different concerns are brought to their attention on social media. For Vitaly, who came to the United Kingdom two years ago, climate change was a newly significant topic. Because it is such a prevalent topic in Western media, articles and posts about climate change started showing up on his Facebook feed, which is different from what he sees in Russia media:

‘For example, with the global climate crisis and issues that have been surrounding that recently, there’s not so much discussion about that in Russia because Russia is not at that stage of development to be thinking about environmental issues as a country, whereas the West is obviously more developed. It’s more concerning here. I think that I definitely learned a lot more and figured out a lot more for myself about this specific issue, given that I was using Western social media rather than Russian ones, because it’s not as much of a current issue in Russia, so they’re not being discussed.’

Moreover, ‘immigrating’ to a service often means ‘emigrating’ from another, which can impact one’s experience online. When a person interacts with people from their country of origin or consumes media from their country through social media, it allows them to ‘experience home away from home’ (Gomes, 2018: 90-92). As such, when a person distances themselves from online content from their home country, in a way, they experience ‘home’ and its politics less. For example, when Pavel started using VKontakte less, his attitude towards Russian politics changed, too:

‘I feel like I think about it less on a daily basis. You can say that when I was browsing it daily I was kind of participating in all of this. Whereas now I can view myself as someone looking [from the] outside... versus being inside of it. So I don’t feel like my views changed that much, but I can sort of not care about it as much almost.’

This shows that instead of outright changing a person’s stance on Russian politics, UK politics, or international politics, social media use may simply change what a person pays attention to. This change in social media use is part of the process of joining different social circles when migrating to a new country.

Stereotypes, alienation, and dismissal of portrayals of Russians

The current study found that the effect of Facebook use on perceptions of Russian politics can be limited due to poorly informed (or so perceived) Western portrayals of Russians and Russian politics. While there are other factors at play, part of the reason why Pavel does not think his opinions on Russian politics have changed since using Facebook is because he chooses not to read about Russian politics as much on Facebook due to its lack of informed opinions. Like him, Vera said that she is ‘not really reading news about Russia on Facebook’. When she reads about Russian news, she ‘would open Russian news website or something like this’. This is because they view the discussion on Russian politics they see in Western media and Facebook as overgeneralised. Pavel explained that he finds better-informed discussions about Russia on VKontakte:

‘...I feel like on Facebook there is a sort of generalisation that “Russia did this, Russia did that”, whereas if you go on VK, there’s obviously a certain personality, Putin, who is outlined for these things, so you won’t get “Russia did this, Russia did that”, you’ll get “Putin did this, Putin is doing that”, whereas on Facebook it’s more like, “Russia invaded Crimea”, whereas on VK you’ll get “Putin did this to Crimea”.’

Outside of Russian communities, Pavel and Vera described it as hard to find meaningful discussions about Russian politics, supporting the notion that Facebook use had limited effect on their opinions on Russian politics. Moreover, some of the interviewees expressed a dislike of the portrayal of Russians in Western media. For Dimitri, because ‘the media portrays Russia sometimes in an evil way’, he explained this perspective makes him feel alienated. Similarly, Anastasia said she thinks that Western reporters ‘don’t know the full story, or perhaps they’re ignoring part of the story’. She described that she finds it difficult to agree with their narrative and instead sees the articles she finds on Facebook as biased. Hence, those who do not agree with the depiction of Russians or Russian politics in Western media might not read about Russian affairs on Western social media as much as they would on Russian social media.

Cross-platform echo chambering

The results of this study indicate that there is echo chambering amongst Russian opposition supporters and pro-government internet users, which transcends the borders of particular social media services. Echo chambering describes the phenomenon whereby a person is only exposed to views that are aligned with her own, in the case of this study, due to them following like-minded individuals on social media platforms (Branco, 2018). This means that despite the different political awareness of Facebook and VKontakte users, as reported by Reuter and Szakonyi, findings from this study suggest users tend to follow pages that align with their political views both on Facebook and VKontakte (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2013: 45). One of the interviewees, who does follow Russian news on Facebook, Ivan, said that the type of perspectives a reader is exposed to depends more on the newspapers and channels a person follows on social media sites, and less on the social media site they use. He said that he himself is ‘subscribed to the same news outlets and the same media on Facebook and on VK’. He mainly follows Russian opposition politicians and ‘liberal media’, which he thinks are more reliable. These ideas support findings from a previous study that reported VKontakte users had a polarised news consumption pattern, which meant users tended to read the same news depending on whether they were pro-government or anti-government (Urman, 2019).

Ivan’s experience also shows the cross-platform influence of news channels. He explained, ‘if you read BBC, [events are] portrayed in one way. If you read RT, it’s portrayed another way...RT or BBC don’t really depend on the platform on which you’re reading it’. Ivan then appeared to go back on his words when he claimed to not follow opposition politicians on VKontakte because it is unsafe to share opposition-related opinions on VKontakte. He stated he does not know if the opposition politicians he follows on Facebook still run pages on VKontakte, but a few other interviewees said that many opposition supporters are no longer putting themselves forward on VKontakte. This apparent contradiction is more easily understood when taking into account the fact that Ivan supported the opposition before moving to Scotland and before censorship became rife on VKontakte, due to the implementation of new Russian laws. When users like Ivan leave VKontakte for Facebook and read pro-opposition news on Facebook, it would not upset what they already understand to be true about Russian politics. Thus, the polarisation of news consumption amongst Russian netizens described by Urman is not an exclusive to VKontakte: it can happen across different sites and services, including Facebook, VKontakte, Twitter, and Odnoklassniki (2019). Therefore, when examining the difference in political views and awareness of Facebook users and VKontakte users, it is important to consider that Western social media might be favoured by users with certain views,

rather than assuming that Western social media use changes the views of its users.

Lack of online security and self-censorship

One of the reasons why Western social media and domestic secure services might be favoured by some Russian users is the lack of data security on VKontakte. Data security online was a significant concern amongst interviewees and an important factor in evaluating social networking services. Several participants expressed distrust towards VKontakte due to safety concerns. Freedom of expression and media freedom in Russia has dwindled since the introduction of anti-extremist laws that keep the definition of 'extremism' vague, giving the state maximum power to interpret the law (Kravchenko, 2019: 165). Since 2014, netizens like Maria Motuznaya and Daniil Markin have been seized and charged for memes posted on the site (Roth, 2018). Motuznaya said VKontakte was 'partially responsible for' having 'given up information more readily than social networks based outside Russia' (Roth, 2018). Ivan's response seems to align with her statement. He stated that he sees a lack of data security when he uses these sites. He compared the reliability of VKontakte with other services:

'[When] something happens, VK (VKontakte) is not very reliable. It will, if government officials, something like FSB, if you're a suspect in any political movements or events, VK will supply government officials with all of your data, with all of your messages, all of your documents, literally with everything. So in that sense VK is very unreliable and very pro-government I suppose. Unlike Facebook, or Telegram, or WhatsApp.'

Thus, VKontakte users may self-censor for fear of harassment and prosecution. Ivan described the wide spectrum of topics users would avoid discussing on VKontakte:

'There are certain things, things that you don't talk about in VK...you don't talk about anything that is not legal. You don't talk about taking part in the protests. You don't talk about protest. You don't talk about meeting up for protest. You don't talk about meeting for any sort of opposition events or movements. It came to a point where you don't even talk about politics on VK. You don't talk about Putin. You don't talk about being in the opposition. You don't talk about some of his decisions. That's partially why I left it.'

As the government becomes more adept at online censorship, the digital sphere stops being a democratizing force that lowers the threshold of starting political movements and undermines autocratic regimes. For dissidents like Ivan and Pavel, censorship reduces the appeal of the site, which turned them away from it at the end and to other service providers, like Telegram and Facebook. Digital migration like this might accentuate existing echo chambering amongst pro-government users on VKontakte by amplifying pro-government voices. This shows the two-way interrelation between social media use and political view. Whilst social media use can influence a person's political perceptions, existing political views can, in turn,

influence a person's decision to use a certain social networking service.

Limitations

Further quantitative research would help us explore the issue with more breadth. There is also a lack of 'diversity' amongst interviewees, as they were all university students sharing a similar age, socio-economic background, and occupation. Furthermore, location may have played a role in influencing their perspectives since migrants living in Glasgow may have vastly different experiences from those living in other cities and/or countries.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the intricate, two-way relationship between social media use and the political opinions of Russian university students living in Glasgow. The findings from this research showed that the desire to fit into the receiving society can incentivise a person to educate themselves on local political issues through social media. It also found that, for Russian students in Glasgow, Facebook and other social media services, can be a useful channel through which one acquires bridging social capital. Not only did the study explore the way in which social media use can help raise awareness of certain political issues, it also discussed how existing political opinions can motivate a person to leave a social networking site. Negative Russian stereotypes and ill-informed Russian portrayals on Facebook also appeared to motivate individuals to obtain their news through Russian media. Finally, a lack of data security and censorship contribute to opposition supporters steering clear of Russian social media. The study found that, because there are seemingly fewer well-informed opinions on Russian politics expressed on Facebook, some interviewees would only read news about Russia on VKontakte and Russian media. Meanwhile, the study also showed that some opposition supporters are driven away from VKontakte due to a lack of data security and censorship. The findings in this research help to contribute to our understanding of how a person's political views are intertwined with their social media use in a dynamic interplay and how migration can influence these patterns. Given the historically powerful impact social media can have on politics, exploring these dynamics further remains essential.

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