

**Mahmoudreza Rahbarqazi**  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3835-2581>  
[m.rahbarghazi@ase.ui.ac.ir](mailto:m.rahbarghazi@ase.ui.ac.ir)  
University of Isfahan

**Raza Mahmoudoghli**  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1111-3612>  
[r\\_oghli@uma.ac.ir](mailto:r_oghli@uma.ac.ir)  
University of Mohaghegh Ardabili

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## Modeling Social Media Effects on Political Distrust in Lebanon

### Abstract

The present study aims to examine the indirect effects of social media on political distrust among Lebanese citizens using data based on the Arab Barometer Wave V. The Arab Barometer Wave V was obtained in 2018–2019 via which 2,400 Lebanese citizens were surveyed. Using the Preacher and Hayes Bootstrapping method, the results of the test the hypotheses indicate that, firstly, social media has a positive effect on citizens' political distrust and causes the increase in their level of distrust in political institutions with the mediator variables corruption perception and poor government performance; and secondly, the results show that although the lack of guaranteed freedoms has a positive effect on increasing political distrust in society, this variable cannot mediate the relationship between social media and political distrust among Lebanese citizens.

### Keywords

**Social Media, corruption perception, poor government performance, lack of guaranteed freedoms, political distrust.**

### 1. Introduction

Advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and new media technologies have changed the nature of communication in general, and media communication in particular. According to Castells (2009), extensive media communication through the Internet attracts global audiences and creates broad topics, identifying and guiding specific and potential audiences. The high flexibility of social media in disseminating information and the interaction of individuals in it has made it the mainstream media worldwide (Shi, Rui & Whinston, 2014). New media play a critical role in the political arena by taking control of public opinion. Social media has brought about sweeping changes in the relationship between citizens and political institutions and has increased individual authority, civic participation, freedom of expression, and collective action (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Now it is time to change the way via which citizens interact with political systems.

While the political implications of social media for political trust are widely discussed in Western democracies (Avery, 2009; Ceron, 2015; Klein & Robison, 2020; Porumbescu, 2015), the situation in authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes in the Middle East is still largely examined. In these countries, the effects of social media may be far more important (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). In authoritarian countries, social media can become a tool for political mobilization and a catalyst for political change. In political regimes where traditional mass media are controlled by the government, social media websites may be the only place where citizens are exposed and exchange dissenting information (Gainous *et al.*, 2015).

In this study, we examine how social media affects political distrust among Lebanese citizens. The reason for choosing Lebanon for research in this article is that, firstly, in recent

years, there have been many riots and political protests in this country and the citizens' trust in political institutions has decreased so that in recent years the country has even encountered difficulties in forming a government. This has affected not only Lebanese society but also some countries abroad. Also, the social and cultural contexts of Lebanese society are such that it has different religions and ethnicities (Calfat, 2018). The existence of these ethnic-religious social divisions in this country has caused the social and political atmosphere of this country to be somewhat different from other countries in the Middle East, so that the results of research in other countries in the region may not be generalized to this country.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In a broad sense, political trust refers to citizens' positive evaluation of key government institutions (van Deth *et al.*, 2007, p. 41). Trust is the most important factor in the legitimacy of political systems. Trust in a government is a vital indicator of democratic health (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Rudolph's (2017, p. 200) points out that political trust acts as a decision-making rule that enables people to easily judge government policies and actions. "Low trust' is usually a sign that some elements of the political system –politicians, institutions or both– are performing poorly; or that citizens' expectations are too high" (Bovens & Wille, 2008). Low levels of trust reflect separation or even alienation between citizens and the government, which in turn leads to a lack of political legitimacy and potentially reduced political participation (Gronlund & Setala, 2007). The main drivers of political distrust are poor government quality, technical inefficiency, poor economic performance, political corruption, lack of democracy, political corruption, and public deprivation (Bertsou, 2019; Carlisle, 2020; Iroghama, 2012; Khan, 2016; Rafaty, 2018).

To explain the levels of political trust in general, he pointed to two theoretical, cultural, and institutional approaches (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Cultural theorists believe that political trust is exogenous and rooted in the cultural norms and socialization of life (Gary & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1988; Putnam, 1995). According to this theory, political trust is less related to the executive capabilities of political institutions and is more due to the culture of society and the socialization conditions of individuals. Trust in political institutions is formed in a long process of socialization, and trust or distrust becomes one of the deepest ideas of the individual (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Institutionalists, on the other hand, assume that political trust is endogenous and claim that the political and economic performance of the state forms political trust (Easton 1975; Hardin, 1999; Hetherington, 1998; Mishler & Rose, 2001). From this perspective, trust in political institutions depends on the efficiency and effectiveness of government policies. From the point of view of institutional theories, political trust is formed concerning how political institutions function. For institutionalists, political trust is essentially a function of people's assessment of the performance of political institutions. An institution that performs satisfactorily will be trusted, while institutions that perform poorly will create political pessimism and political distrust in the minds of the people (Williams, 1965). According to Newton (2001), political trust leads to the creation of efficient political institutions and the improvement of government performance. He argues that trust in political institutions is largely based on evaluating how the political system works. The evaluation of the performance of the political system is influenced by components such as inflation, unemployment, political corruption or the inability of the political system, victory or defeat in war, economic growth, and crime rates. These are the indicators of government performance that affect each individual. However, they do not affect everyone equally (Newton, 2001, pp. 202-212).

According to Rothstein and Stolle (2008), what is important for political trust is the efficiency and justice of institutions, and the lack of trust in institutions, the existence of corruption and bribery, and the feeling of insecurity concerning the government will affect political trust. Corrupt and unjust institutions cause the experience of discrimination and

injustice, which in turn will negatively affect political trust. In a study of the roots of political trust in modern democracies in Eastern Europe, comparing cultural and institutional theories, Mishler and Rose (2001) concluded that institutional theories have a very good explanation, while cultural theories, at least in these societies. They do not have much explanatory power. His findings show that in authoritarian regimes, the performance of institutions and the socialization of individuals conflict with each other, citizens are more influenced by the performance of institutions and their evaluation of them than the lessons learned from previous education. While previous research has linked political trust to both social capital and institutional functioning, we argue that with the development of communication technologies in non-democratic countries, citizens' evaluations of political institutions are being influenced by social media. Social media can influence citizens' political orientations towards political factors, institutions, and processes by informing and focusing on issues related to political corruption and the poor performance of political institutions, as well as emphasizing the lack of political freedom in society. In political regimes where traditional mass media are controlled by the state, social media may be the only place where citizens are exposed and exchange conflicting information (Bekmagambetov *et al.*, 2018).

The media is a lens through which citizens gather political information about the performance of political institutions and adjust their attitudes accordingly (Ceron, 2015). Classical studies discuss the relationship between media and political trust from two perspectives. According to the videomalaise thesis, the media leads to increased pessimism and mistrust in the government (Robinson, 1975, 1976). According to the virtuous circle theory, arguing that those who are politically involved will use the media to obtain more information, and even get more involved (Norris, 2000), the study examines three approaches to the effects of social media on political trust. An approach that discusses the positive effects of social media on political trust (Anduiza *et al.*, 2009; Norris, 2000; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009). The second approach discusses the negative effects of social media on political trust (Bekmagambetov *et al.*, 2018; Ceron, 2015; You & Wang, 2020) and the third approach, i.e., the party approach, looks at the effects of the media on political trust (Klein & Robison, 2020). Optimists positively assess the effect of social media on political trust. This approach believes that mass media contributes to the political interests and political participation of citizens, leading to increased trust in the political system (Norris, 2000; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009). Norris (2000) shows that exposure to political news can build trust in democratic institutions. According to Valenzuela *et al.* (2009) social media activities with social trust, civic participation, and political participation in The United States was in touch. For Anduiza *et al.* (2009), the media provides information to citizens that is useful for assessing the efficiency of political institutions and making informed choices.

The opposite approach has a pessimistic view of the effects of social media. Im *et al.* (2014) confirm that citizens who spend more time displaying the web have lower levels of trust. Ceron (2015) argues that news coverage on social media should undermine trust because it is associated with higher exposure rates to marginalized voices and anti-systemic arguments. Findings (You & Wang, 2020) show that Internet usage leads to citizens' distrust in political institutions. Democratic environments enable citizens to connect their online behaviors and offline organization, to unleash political discontent, and at the same time to facilitate communication with government institutions. In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, the Internet causes citizens to be dissatisfied and distrustful of the government. Bekmagambetov *et al.* (2018) show that the critical information that people see, read, and share online on social media can undermine their trust in political institutions. This decline in trust may threaten the legitimacy of the ruling regime and provoke protests. Some studies look at the effects of social media on political trust in terms of political parties. Klein and Robison (2020) point out that social media makes trust judgment bipolar across party lines. People interpret the new political information of the media through party lenses. Therefore, those who have a party

affiliation with the ruling party have more confidence in the government by increasing the use of their social media. Moreover, those with negative views of the ruling party reported less trust in the government. As a result, it leads to more polarization in judging trust between people with different party attitudes.

The debate over what content and information on social media affects political trust. The present study knows political corruption perception, poor government performance, and the lack of political freedoms as factors affecting political trust. Initially, it is shown that non-democratic countries face economic and political corruption. Social media has played an influential role in political distrust of political institutions by focusing on exposing political and economic injustices and discrimination and abusing the power of political rulers. Results of studies such as Bhattacharyya and Hodler (2015) and Jha and Sarangi (2017) indicate the effects of social media on government corruption perception. Social media played a significant role in combating corruption by expanding information transparency and reducing the cost of exposing corruption (Nam, 2018). Social media provides a cheap and fast way to share information and reach larger audiences to organize public protests against the corruption of government officials and politicians (Jha & Sarangi, 2017). Patterson (2009) shows that the media exacerbates public dissatisfaction with the government for disseminating critical information about politicians or exposing scandals. Jha and Sarangi (2017) report a significant negative relationship between the influence of Facebook and corruption using multinational analysis. Bhattacharyya and Hodler (2015) show that democracy and press freedom can have a significant negative impact on corruption.

There are two conflicting claims in the study of the effects of political corruption. Corruption efficiency approaches for underdeveloped countries, also known as “grease the wheels” for inefficient organizations. Huntington (1968) and Leff (1964) know corruption as a way to overcome the inefficiency of rules and regulations and believe corruption plays the role of oil. For dry wheels, these administrative and economic systems play a role in facilitating economic growth and investment. Unlike this approach, other empirical studies have confirmed high levels of corruption and low levels of trust in communities (Anderson & Yuliya, 2003; Seligson, 2006). These studies show that corruption undermines the foundations of the legitimacy of the political system and affects the quality of government, trust, public support, satisfaction, and ultimately the greater stability of democracies. Corruption reduces a regime’s ability to respond to citizens’ concerns (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Anderson and Yuliya (2003) show that citizens in corrupt countries have lower levels of trust and worse assessments of the political system. In Warren’s 2004 view, corruption corrupts the political system, leading to public skepticism and indifference. Seligson (2006) indicates that the spread of corruption in Latin American countries has reduced the legitimacy of governments and has reduced the level of public trust in these countries. According to these cases, the first research hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

H1. Social media usage has a direct positive correlation with political distrust with the mediation of citizens’ corruption perceptions.

Previous research shows that government performance affects political trust (Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020; Zhang & Guo, 2019). Understanding government performance refers to the political implications of citizens’ expectations of governments (Bailard, 2014). Institutional theorists emphasize that political trust is formed with how political institutions function. In this approach, the existing institutions in society are considered as the main factor in creating and destroying trust. The performance and ability of political institutions and agents in meeting the economic and social needs and desires of citizens and increasing their satisfaction have a decisive effect on the level of political trust of the people (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Understanding the poor performance of governments is a potential threat to lower trust in them. According to Bouckaert and van de Walle (2003), the negative public image of a government is due to the poor performance of its political institutions. The findings

of Haugsgjerd and Kumlin (2020) confirm the correlation between dissatisfaction with government welfare functions and political trust. As they put it, the increase in dissatisfaction leads to more distrust in governments over time, in such a way that initial dissatisfaction leads to further downward changes in trust. Negative evaluations of performance increase distrust, which in turn leads to a more pessimistic interpretation of risks and social protection.

As the power of government and state media lose their credibility in the eyes of citizens, social media will be a powerful new platform for evaluating government performance. Bailard (2014) argues that the Internet in transitional regimes is changing the way through which citizens evaluate the state. The Internet provides a convenient public space for ordinary users to expose government mistakes. From Zhang and Guo's (2019) perspective, online news streaming provides a consistent global scale in which citizens can critically evaluate the performance of their government. According to Bekmagambetov *et al.* (2018), social media provides an opportunity structure for the flow of information that can provoke distrust in the government and threaten legitimacy. Finally, it encourages protest, or it may be simply directed by government actors.

Citizens' attitudes toward their government are a fundamental soft indicator of a regime's legitimacy and success (Bouckaert & van de Walle, 2003). When citizens perceive their government positively, they gain more trust in it and engage in their affairs (Mishler & Rose, 2005). On the contrary, negative perceptions of the government create political indifference, governance challenges, and even support for regime change (Harmel & Robertson, 1986). For Klein and Robison's (2020), social media biases the judgment of trust across party lines. Citizens tend to choose the information that closely matches their expectations of the government. The use of online mass media leads to negative evaluations of the government among those who have negative partisan tendencies towards the government. For those who have positive partisan tendencies towards the government, online mass media may improve their understanding of government performance. According to these cases, the second hypothesis of the research is as follows:

H2. Social media usage has a positive correlation with political distrust with the mediation of perception of poor government performance.

Previous research showed that free and democratic space has a great impact on building political trust in democratic governments. Trust is an integral part of deepening democracy. Booth and Seligson (2009) found that trust in political institutions as part of the legitimacy of the public system strongly affects the understanding of democracy. Democracy requires a public space independent of the state. A space in which rational critical debates take place (Polat, 2005). According to Nisbet *et al.* (2012), Internet usage is significantly correlated to citizens' commitment to democratic norms. The Internet is a tool that can give new strength to democratic processes by creating public cyberspace, and by establishing consultation and dialogue between citizens and governments. It also can help strengthen critical citizenship, promote democracy, and expand the public sphere. ICT has become a way of exercising the voice of individuals and marginalized groups in support of their rights and aspirations by providing an open civil discourse with a large population and transparent access without restriction to the internal functioning of the government (Michelson, 2006). As Lewis (2012) argues, in this virtual environment, alternative voices are no longer controlled by dominant media outlets, and critical thinking is taking place in this space. As a result, citizens are more likely to be exposed to marginalized voices and anti-systemic arguments that can be trusted. This issue can reduce their trust in their government.

In authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, free space and democracy are seen as a threat to the existential nature of regimes (Gainous *et al.*, 2015). Media control is a vital strategy in an authoritarian state because it allows the state to strengthen its legitimacy claims (Muller, 2013). In authoritarian countries, online databases may be the only means of accessing certain types of information (Gainous *et al.*, 2015). This provides ample space for the Internet

to provide alternative information and an alternative framework, leading to many critical views of government institutions (Tang & Huhe, 2014). Shirky (2011) believes that ordinary citizens have been able to share their facts and beliefs through access to social media, which may be an alternative or even a critique of the original state discourse. Gainous *et al.* (2019) show that communication technologies provide an opportunity for alternative information flows in non-democratic countries so that Internet users can compete with official government attitudes. They also point out that many authoritarian governments try to limit the flow of information by restricting access, filtering, and creating firewalls because of the threat posed by these communication tools.

However, this method requires a lot of expertise and resources, which makes online censorship difficult and often ineffective, and in some cases governments not only block information, but also distort, manipulate, and control the use of online information, as (Bekmagambetov *et al.*, 2018) show that in authoritarian countries, social media becomes an element of government media instead of becoming a tool for democratizing the flow of information. It can be used to support and maintain the current regime. Thus, the advent of the Internet puts more pressure on authoritarian regimes to maintain their political legitimacy. However, the Internet has become an essential space for the development of a new critical citizen (Huhe *et al.*, 2018). The Internet has been able to facilitate civil activities by expanding the space and tools available for political participation and citizen mobilization. Thus, the question that the present study seeks to answer is:

RQ1. Does social media usage have a positive correlation with political distrust with the mediation of perception of the lack of guaranteed freedoms in society?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data and methods**

For data collection, the Arab Barometer Wave V (2018–2019) was used. This project was conducted in collaboration with the University of Michigan, Princeton University, and other universities and research centers. The study area covers the MENA region. Arab Barometer data includes surveys of Arab citizens' attitudes and behaviors, especially in the political, cultural, and social spheres, in wave V of 12 countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.

In the latest wave of Arab Barometer data, based on the present study, 26,780 citizens of the 12 Arab countries mentioned above were surveyed, with Lebanese citizens contributing 2,400 to the data collected. In the statistical sample obtained from Lebanon, 50% were men and 50% were women between the ages of 18 and 92. In terms of education level, 0.8% of the population were illiterate, 8.2% hold elementary education, 18.4% basic education, 30.4% secondary education, 12.8% tertiary education, 2.7% bachelor's degrees, and 8.7% master's degrees and higher. Moreover, 13.7% of the citizens could not afford the living expenses, 39.3% could hardly manage the living expenses, 38% could afford their living expenses, and 9% could save money. Finally, the data were collected from various Lebanese towns and villages, including 52.9% Muslims, 39.2% Christians, and 7.9% believers of other religions.

Via SPSS software, hierarchical regression was employed to test the direct effects of poor performance, corruption perception, and guaranteed freedoms on political distrust and the bootstrap method via the Multimedia Procedure Multiplier software program (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to test intermediate paths and the indirect effects of social media usage on political distrust.

#### **3.2. Measurement of variables**

*Public social media usage:* This variable was measured by one item as follows: How many hours on a typical day do you spend on social media platforms [such as Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp]? (Range= 1-5; Mean= 2.83; Std. Deviation= 1.01).

*Corruption perception:* Corruption perception was measured by respondents' self-evaluations via a 4-point Likert scale. In this regard, two items were used to measure the corruption perception. The above figures indicate the perception of more corruption by respondents: To what extent do you think that there is corruption within the national state agencies and institutions in your country? [reversed]; (2) How widespread do you think corruption is in your local/municipal government? (Range= 1-4; Mean= 3.17; Std. Deviation= 0.59). The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.68, which is minimally acceptable ( DeVellis, 1991, p. 85).

*Poor government performance:* To measure the performance of the government, three items were employed in which the respondents evaluated the current performance of the government in their country in terms of the following cases. The above figures indicate the increase in government performance from the respondents' perspectives. Creating employment opportunities; (2) Narrowing the gap between rich and poor; (3) Providing security and order (Range= 1-4; Mean= 3.36; Std. Deviation= 0.53). The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.66, which is minimally acceptable ( DeVellis, 1991, p. 85).

*Lack of guaranteed freedoms:* This variable is measured using two items via a 4-point Likert scale. Guaranteeing freedoms in this study, we evaluate people's views on the following variables in their country. The above figures point out the lack of guaranteed freedoms by the government: Freedom to express opinions; (2) Freedom to participate in peaceful protests and demonstrations (Range= 1-4; Mean= 2.74; Std. Deviation= 0.89). The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.86, which is at a very good level ( DeVellis, 1991, p. 85).

*Political distrust:* In this study, political distrust means no trust in political institutions measured in three items via a 4-point Likert scale. The above figures indicate respondents' distrust of political institutions. In this regard, the respondents were asked how much they trust the government institutions: (1) Government (Council of Ministers); (2) Courts and legal system; (3) The elected council of representatives (the parliament) (Range= 1-4; Mean= 3.21; Std. Deviation= 0.66). The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.79, which is acceptable ( DeVellis, 1991, p. 85).

#### **4. Results**

Hierarchical regression was used to test hypotheses and analyze the direct effects of control and independent variables on political distrust (Table 1). To this end, the first model merely tests the effect of demographic variables on political distrust. The results of the regression test in the first model show that age ( $\beta = 0.047$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), level of education ( $\beta = -0.071$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ), income situation ( $\beta = -0.071$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ) and religion ( $\beta = 0.052$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ) had significant effects on political distrust. The R-squared value in this model was 0.020, indicating that demographic variables explain a 2% variance of political distrust. With the addition of social media in the second model of the study, the results show that social media has not had a significant effect on political distrust. Also, R-squared is still 0.020 and has not changed.

Model third examined the impact of citizens' perceptions of corruption on political distrust. The results showed that the perception of corruption ( $\beta = 0.391$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ) had a positive and significant effect on the citizens' political distrust. In Model 3, the value of R Square is 0.175. The difference between models 3 and 2, 0.155, shows that after removing the effect of demographic variables and social media, the variable of corruption perception explains 15.5% of the variance of political distrust.

The fourth model focused on the effect of citizens' perception of poor government performance on their political distrust. In this regard, the fourth model showed that citizens' perception of poor government ( $\beta = .436$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ) had positive and significant effects on citizens' political distrust. In Model 3, the R-Squared value was 0.326. The difference between the two R-squared of models 3 and 4 was 0.171, indicating that after removing the effect of demographic variables, social media, and perceptions of corruption, the variable of poor government performance explains 17.1% of the variance of political distrust.

**Table 1:** Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Political Distrust.

	Model1	Model2	Model3	Model4	Model5
Age	.002(.00)*	.002(.00)	.004(.00)**	.003(.00)**	.002(.00)*
Gender	.001(.03)	.001(.03)	.002(.02)	-.007(.02)	-.006(.02)
Education	-.034(.01)**	-.033(.01)**	-.031 (.01)**	-	-.028(.01)**
Income	-.058(.01)**	-.057(.01)**	-.056 (.01)**	.034(.01)***	-.009(.01)
Situation					
Religion	.070(.03)*	.070(.03)*	.119(.03)***	.144(.02)***	.110(.02)***
Social media		-.009(.01)	-.019(.01)	-.041(.01)**	-
Corruption			.450 (.02)***	.238(.02)***	.234(.02)***
Poor				.560(.02)***	.527(.02)***
Performance					
lack of					.127(.01)***
freedoms					
(Constant)	3.316 (.09)***	3.345(.11)***	1.802(.13)***	.567(.13)***	.393(.13)**
R Square	.020	.020	.175	.326	.352
F	8.08***	6.78***	59.13***	117.62***	117.58***

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* denote significance at 0.1%, 1%, and 5% levels, respectively. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Sample size= 2226.

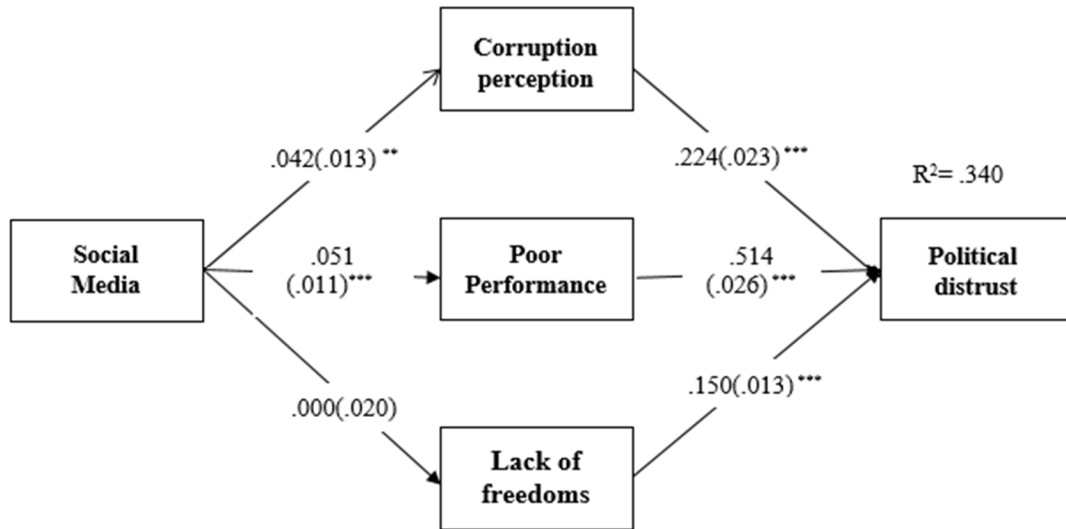
Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, the results of Model fifth showed that the lack of guaranteed freedoms ( $\beta = 0.170$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ) had positive and significant effects on citizens' political distrust. In model 5, the R-Square value was 0.352. The difference between the two coefficients of determination of models 4 and 5 was 0.026 showed that after removing the effect of demographic variables, social media, perceptions of corruption and the poor government performance, the variable of lack of guaranteed freedoms explains 2.6% of the variance of political distrust. Further, although social media did not have a significant effect on political distrust in the second model of the research, this variable in the last model could have a significant effect on political distrust ( $\beta = -0.071$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Besides, the level of income of individuals that had a significant effect on political distrust in the first model did not have a significant effect in the last model.

The main hypothesis of the research theoretical model was the existence of an indirect path from the variable social media usage (through the mediating variables poor government performance, corruption perception, and the lack of guaranteed freedoms) to the variable political distrust. In this regard, the Bootstrapping method (Pritcher & Hayes, 2008) was employed to significantly determine the mediating path of social media usage on political distrust through the mediation of poor government performance, corruption perception, and the lack of guaranteed freedoms.



**Figure 1:** Mediation model, adapted from Preacher and Hayes (2008).



Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, and \* denote significance at 0.1%, 1%, and 5% levels, respectively. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.  $F=253.10^{***}$ . Sample size= 1970.  
 Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1 illustrates the non-standardized straight path coefficients of the multimedia model using the Bootstrapping method. According to this figure, in paths a, the non-standardized direct effect of the social media usage variable on corruption perception is 0.042, that of the social media usage variable on poor government performance is 0.051, and that of the social media usage variable on the lack of guaranteed freedoms is 0.000. In path b, the non-standardized direct effect of the corruption perception variable on political distrust is 0.224, that of poor government performance to political distrust is 0.514, and that of the lack of guaranteed freedoms on political distrust is 0.150.

**Table 2:** Indirect effects of the social media usage variable on political distrust through proposed mediator variables (paths a & b).

	Effect	se	Z	p	95% Bootstrap CL	
					Lower	Upper
Total	0.036	0.008	4.091	0.000	0.019	0.052
Corruption perception	0.009	0.003	3.031	0.002	0.004	0.016
Poor performance	0.026	0.006	4.294	0.000	0.014	0.039
Lack of freedoms	0.000	0.003	0.037	0.969	-0.006	0.006
C1	-0.017	0.005	-2.928	0.003	-0.029	-0.006
C2	0.009	0.004	2.216	0.026	0.000	0.018
C3	0.026	0.006	4.072	0.000	0.012	0.039

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2 shows the results of the Bootstrapping method. It illustrates the indirect effects of social media usage on political distrust mediated by poor government performance, corruption perception, and the lack of guaranteed freedoms (paths a & b). In this test, the number of sample bootstrap (k) samples is 1000 and the level of reliability for reliability intervals is 95%. As the table shows, the total indirect effect of social media usage on political distrust ( $\Sigma ab$ ) is 0.036 and is significant in the confidence interval of 0.019 to 0.052. The indirect effect of social media usage on political distrust mediated by corruption perception

(a1b1) in the confidence interval .004 to .016 times is .009. The direct effect of social media usage on political distrust with the mediation of poor government performance (a2b2) in the confidence interval .014 to .039 is .026. These values are statistically significant. However, the indirect effect of social media usage on political distrust with the mediation of the lack of guaranteed freedoms (a3b3) in the confidence interval -0.006 to 0.006 is 0.000. This value is not statistically significant. Finally, a z-score indicates that poor government performance (a2b2) is the best model for explaining the indirect impact of social media use on political distrust.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Lebanon is located in a region where there has been widespread political instability in recent years so that these political protests have changed governments, internal unrest, or economic reforms in the region's countries. Therefore, given the significance of this issue, it seems necessary to pay attention to the grounds for the formation and unreliable reasons for citizens for the ruling political institutions. In this regard, as discussed in the research theoretical section, one of the main reasons for the spread of political distrust among citizens are social media usage, making the process of forming protest political thoughts easier because of the contact of like-minded people with each other and facilitating the widespread dissemination of political-economic information and increase in public awareness. This study examined the effect of social media on political distrust. But as mentioned in the hypotheses, social media usage indirectly affects political distrust. Thus, in this study, the indirect effects of social media usage on political distrust were tested with the mediation of poor government performance, corruption perception, and the lack of guaranteed freedoms. Accordingly, first of all, the results of testing the research hypotheses were consistent with Bhattacharyya and Hodler (2015), Morris and Klesner (2010), Zhang and Guo (2019), and Klein and Robison *et al.* (2020). The results show that the two variables poor government performance and corruption perception have indirect and significant effects on political distrust.

In the theoretical part, it was mentioned that social media can strengthen political distrust in society by increasing the perception of corruption among citizens. Of course, it is clear that first, the contexts of such perceptions must exist in society for social media to lead to such perceptions among individuals. Such platforms seem to be ready for such a thing in Lebanon. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (2019), Lebanon ranks 137th out of 198 countries in terms of corruption perception with a score of 28, so that its citizens have a high perception of corruption in their country. This has led some political groups in the country to try to increase political distrust among citizens by using social media to fuel perceptions of corruption. The same thing has happened in governance. For example, according to World Bank (2020) data, while in 2010 Lebanon's score on the Government Effectiveness Index was -0.28, but as the Lebanese government's performance has weakened in recent years, its score on the Government Effectiveness Index in 2019 has reached -0.83. Such platforms have led many opposition political groups in the country to use new means of communication, including social media, to criticize the current state of political institutions in the country and increase political distrust among citizens.

Communication between social media users does not seem to follow national boundaries as traditional media do. In some cases, the new media acts as an institution to counter the existing political system, extending its actions to the real world and coordinating the protests and opposition of the existing political system. Social media quickly stimulates people's feelings, emotions, and evaluations towards protest actions by quickly informing them about the secret and acute political, economic, and cultural issues of the society and interpreting these issues in such a way that the existing political system is the main cause of the current problems. Thus, distrust in a political institution in society is reduced. The various experiences of recent social movements in different countries, especially in the Middle East,

have shown that politics has largely become a media issue driven by the space or framework of social media. On social media, politics is less analyzed as a rational process, but it acts as a series of symbolic movements to which people react. Therefore, people are affected by the news of this social media are becoming more and more media-savvy and rethink the critical political situation of the society, losing their trust in the ruling political institutions.

Moreover, since information control in the modern age is the main global, national, and local actors' power lever, many political actors skillfully use technology and communication facilities, such as the Internet and social media, to establish their critical bases against their competitors. In many Middle Eastern countries, traditional media are largely controlled by the government, so political groups opposed to the ruling political order try to spread more negative news about the institutions and political groups in the country through social media. With these media, a kind of public space is formed, and many people, without seeing and exchanging views with each other, think like each other and consequently, act like each other. Accordingly, by producing messages, slogans, and ideas in an artistic way and with the help of images, graphics, music, etc., mentalities are manipulated and mobilized. Finally, these mentalities manipulated by social media are directed towards distrust in the ruling political institutions.

The results showed that although the variable the lack of guaranteed freedoms directly increases political distrust in society, as a mediator variable it cannot indirectly cause that social media usage affects political distrust. The reason for this seems to be the Lebanese political climate. Although it does not have as many democratic structures as some European countries and is far from some of the standards in the EU, it is important to note that Lebanon is located in an area where many Middle Eastern countries are located. They suffer from authoritarian structures, and in some countries in the region, there are not even elections to appoint rulers. In such an atmosphere, Lebanon is classified as one of the few partly free countries in the region with a score of 44, according to Freedom House (2020) reports. This has probably caused the citizens of this country not to protest and complain about this issue and to consider the freedoms in their country as acceptable. Thus, the opposition parties and groups in Lebanon will not be able to use social media to influence them.

The findings of this study showed that social media alone will not have a direct effect on increasing political distrust in society and even based on the results of this study with a low effect size has reduced political distrust. In other words, social media is not a cause but a tool that opponents of governments can only make optimal use of when political, economic, and cultural contexts allow. Probably this is why social media could not have a significant effect on increasing political distrust through the mediator variable lack of guaranteed freedoms. It should be noted that this study was prepared when the Arab Barometer data were reported for only a few countries in the Mena region. By increasing the data of the surveyed countries during 2020, researchers can test more countries in the region in future research to confirm or refute the findings of this study with more validity.

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