

Selection Bias of News on Social Media: The Role of Selective Sharing and Avoidance During the Lebanon Uprising

CLAUDIA KOZMAN

JAD MELKI

Lebanese American University, Lebanon

This study examines selection bias on social media during the 2019 Lebanon protests. Based on the theoretical concepts of selective avoidance and selective sharing, the survey of a nationally representative probability sample found selective avoidance to occur across all social media. Among the various protest-related activities, sharing news was the only predictor significantly related to both selective avoidance and participation in protests across four social media platforms. In addition, political factors significantly predicted selective avoidance. Finally, selection bias was evident in the role selective sharing of news on social media played in predicting selective avoidance only among the protest supporters. The findings indicate that protest supporters could play a major role in mobilizing the public to participate in street protests by selectively sharing and avoiding protest-related news on social media.

Keywords: selective avoidance, selective sharing, Lebanese media, social media users, protests and social media

The latest digital news research highlights social media's central role in people's news consumption. New digital habits, especially those centered on social communication and news, have shifted the focus to private messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, which has become the main platform for discussing and sharing news in non-Western countries (Kleis Nielsen, Newman, Fletcher, & Kalogeropoulos, 2019). Research has also related WhatsApp to positive emotions elicited through political discussions among adolescents, increasing political knowledge about specific issues (Vermeer, Kruikemeier, Trilling, & de Vreese, 2020).

With more digital media replacing interpersonal communication and legacy news as primary sources of information, people's online circles have significantly expanded. As the Internet blurred the lines between the rigid domains of news and discussion, it paved the way for "communicative heterogeneity" in the form of a wide array of websites and online spaces for political discussions (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 152). Coupled with the presence of large numbers of individuals in online circles, this heterogeneity diversifies people's networks, consequently increasing their chances of encountering political difference (Brundidge, 2010;

Claudia Kozman: claudia.kozman@lau.edu.lb

Jad Melki (corresponding author): jmelki@lau.edu.lb

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Dahlgren, 2005) in the form of disagreements and opinion-challenging content (Min & Wohn, 2018). In such a heterogeneous online world, people have learned new ways to manage their digital activities. While some have welcomed the diverse opinions of the online public sphere, others have avoided them, clustering themselves into homogeneous circles of like-minded individuals (Dahlgren, 2005). When it occurs, avoidance finds an ally in social media, whose structural components make it simple to avoid anyone and anything. Therefore, while digital media allow users to select the sources with whom they agree, at times sharing them, they equally allow them to avoid and reject those who challenge their beliefs. This selection bias, which manifests itself through selective sharing and selective avoidance, forms the base of this study.

Against the backdrop of the October 2019 antigovernment protests in Lebanon, this survey examines selective avoidance, selective sharing, and political participation using social media usage patterns, as well as political factors such as attitudes, political interest, and partisanship. The study advances extant literature on selective avoidance and selective sharing beyond the context of stable Western societies and situates it within the Global South and among people undergoing violent political turmoil, which contributes to the robustness of these theoretical concepts in situations rarely studied before (Georgiou, 2012; Kozman & Melki, 2018; Melki & Kozman, 2019).

Although the entire Arab region has faced several revolts since 2010, in what was referred to as the Arab Spring, Lebanon has been experiencing various levels of conflicts and uprisings for decades. The latest and most momentous outbreak was sparked on October 17, 2019, after a politician proposed taxing WhatsApp voice calls as a solution for the rapidly deteriorating economic situation. The mostly peaceful protests paralyzed the country and forced a government resignation. However, what started as the *WhatsApp revolution* masked deep-seated public resentment toward widespread corruption and a sectarian-clientelist system that recreates the country's political elites and keeps its people disenfranchised and devoid of basic public services. Furthermore, the rapidly shrinking economy, mass economic migration, and unemployment served as a tipping point for most Lebanese, who joined the protests in droves (Yee & Saad, 2019) and invaded social media with pro- and antiprotest messages.

The Lebanon uprising can be divided roughly into four stages. *Stage 1*: The first week (October 17–23) witnessed massive protests that included diverse members of political parties and politically nonaffiliated individuals. *Stage 2*: In the second week (October 24–29), some major politically affiliated groups withdrew from the streets after several prominent leaders called on them to end the protests, but the number of demonstrators remained large. At that point, various groups started to emerge and develop diverging agendas. Many proprotesters, for instance, opposed the use of roadblocks as a tactic to paralyze the country and bring people to the streets. *Stage 3*: Division became more pronounced during this period (October 30–December 19), which started with the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and ended with the nomination of a new prime minister. In this period, which coincided with the fieldwork for this study, political parties tried to jump on the uprising's bandwagon, which quickly sowed division with those opposed to political parties. *Stage 4*: In the final stage, when Hassan Diab's government took power in January 2020, many proprotesters called for a break from protests to give the new, supposedly technocratic government a chance while others continued in smaller numbers until the COVID-19 threat all but killed the street protests by end of February.

Theoretical Framework

Social Media and Civic Participation

Beyond their early usage for socializing purposes, social media today provide individuals with platforms to express opinions around political issues and current events (Boulianne, 2019). While social media still serve a social role, their role changes during controversial public issues, such as government elections and political unrest (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Likened to a Habermasian public sphere, where members of the public come together to debate issues, thus creating a civically active citizenry (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), digital platforms have been continuously used by activists to advocate their causes during protests (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Although the particular uses may differ across countries, the main uses remain centered on fostering civic agency. In repressive states, social media can provide alternative spaces for individuals to engage in political discussions and mobilize themselves around common causes, although some governments have used these platforms for surveillance and persecution (Owen, 2017). In the case of the former, such as during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, social media became spaces for activists to counter the dominant state-sponsored rhetoric (Lee et al., 2014).

In addition, social media effect civic and political participation. Far from being direct, these effects are contingent on various elements, including the nature of the social media use (Boulianne, 2019), type of exposure (Kim & Chen, 2016), attentiveness to political discussions (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005), and personality traits (Kim & Chen, 2015). Research revealed that social media use predicts civic action in both political (Kim & Chen, 2015, 2016) and nonpolitical contexts (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), but not always political participation (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016). When social media were used for general purposes, they did not predict participation, but when the use was for informational purposes, they were related to political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). This relationship could also be indirect, mediated by discussion network heterogeneity and individuals' personality traits (Kim & Chen, 2015).

The different types of news-sharing activities also interact with network heterogeneity, roughly defined as "diverse points of view within communication networks" (Choi & Lee, 2015, p. 258), to influence political behavior (Choi, Lee, & Metzgar, 2017). For instance, social media use has a greater effect on participation for political expression, compared with information seeking (Boulianne, 2019). During protests, social media uses are expected to change and be geared toward information sharing and political participation, and not socializing. When tensions are high, social media are likely to encourage political participation because of the intensity of discussions online, turning these platforms into tools that spur others into action (Lee et al., 2014).

Besides the type of use, exposure type warrants a closer inspection as it relates to political behavior. Early research on political participation online revealed that politically heterogeneous networks are related to decreases in political activity, based on people's reluctance to risk their social relations (Mutz, 2002). Recent research also found discussion disagreements on social media to be negatively related to political participation (Lu, Heatherly, & Lee, 2016). In contrast, Kim (2011) found that social media use was positively related to exposure to cross-cutting or attitude-discrepant content, with online news sharing influencing this relationship as a mediator (Kim, 2011). Kim and Chen (2016) also found that social media

use had a strong relationship with online political participation through exposure to cross-cutting content, but this relationship was stronger when people were exposed to attitude-consistent content.

An important form of political action during protests is on-the-ground participation. Prior to the advent of social media, offline social networks were central in organizing collective action toward participation in protests (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011). Nowadays, these networks have largely shifted to the online world, where social media have been used as agitating forces (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Predictions of on-street activity, however, are likely to vary across different protests. A study comparing protests in Brazil, Spain, and the United States found Twitter and Facebook to be effective in amplifying demonstrations through continuous communication that could have aided in recruitment (Bastos, Mercea, & Charpentier, 2015). In Chile, frequent Facebook use was associated with protest activity, especially when people used it for news and socializing with peers but not for self-expression (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012). In Hong Kong, Facebook use for self-expression and protest information was related to more selective avoidance, which predicted participation in the street protests (Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2017). Similar results appeared in Egypt, where street participation was fueled in part by social media use (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Although the Arab uprisings generated heated debates about the role of social media in spurring street protests, with scholars bitterly divided between *digital evangelists* and *technorealists*, empirical evidence that addresses this important question remains scarce (Comunello & Anzera, 2012).

Extant literature conceptualizes political participation in different ways: as offline political participation, online political participation, and civic participation. This may explain the differences in the effects reported in the literature (Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2019). Several meta-analyses have also yielded different results pertaining to the effect size of Internet use and political participation. Boulianne's (2020) meta-analysis of 243 studies found a positive relationship between digital media use and civic and political participation, a relationship that gradually increases over time. Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang (2016) also found social media use for information to be positively associated with political participation. Another recent meta-analysis that took into consideration several factors to measure effect size found the Internet, in general, to have a weak-to-moderate relationship with political participation (Chae et al., 2019), with social media showing a stronger correlation. Both Boulianne (2020) and Chae and associates (2019) attribute the stronger effects to the rise of social media.

Although the findings differ slightly, most studies outlined above reveal social media use to be positively related to civic engagement and political participation. This applies to situations of political upheaval as well. In this context, the Lebanese protests present a similar picture to the Umbrella Movement. Like the Hong Kong public, the Lebanese relied tremendously on Facebook and WhatsApp to organize themselves for street participation. Throughout the antigovernment protests, social media users around the country created groups on different platforms to spur one another to participate in protests. University students and faculty, among other groups, held online and offline discussions, announced marches, and called for protests through WhatsApp and Facebook. Based on the similarities of these protests, combined with the heavy use of digital media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, we expect to find similar trends in Lebanon. To further support our hypothesis, we draw on Boulianne's (2020) meta-analysis that found no differences among the countries studied, we hypothesize a positive relationship between social media and behavior in the Lebanese protests:

H1a: Protest-related Facebook use is positively associated with participation in street protests.

H1b: Protest-related WhatsApp use is positively associated with participation in street protests.

H1c: Protest-related social media use is positively associated with participation in street protests.

Selective Avoidance on Social Media

For decades, people interested in news would turn to a manageable list of mass media to satisfy their informational needs. Today, the high choice media environment that merges traditional media with user-generated content calls for further selectivity on the part of the user. This selectivity occurs in both exposure to content and avoidance of content or other users. Drawing on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, media scholars have theorized a situation where individuals selectively expose themselves to attitude-consistent media content that affirms their beliefs to reduce dissonance (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020). Motivated by confirmation bias, selective exposure suggests people select media sources that confirm their attitudes and avoid those that stand against these attitudes (Hart et al., 2009). Selective exposure to proattitudinal content, however, does not necessarily mean selective avoidance of antiattitudinal content, as these are two distinct phenomena (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Song, 2017). While individuals are primarily motivated to seek information that justifies their opinions, they do not systematically screen out other opinions or avoid information that counters these opinions (Garrett, 2009; Song, Cho, & Benefield, 2020).

Political conflict, however, provides a different context that could potentially cause several changes in people's news-consumption habits. Unlike normal situations, social unrest alters people's priorities, challenging their ability to engage in political discussions peacefully and openly, both online and offline. Faced with looming changes, public opinion becomes divided and polarized, as was the case during the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, where the on-the-ground division was reflected on social media as well (Lee et al., 2014). Similarly in Lebanon, the protests that targeted all political elites created various factions in the public that ranged from staunch supporters to staunch opposers. In such an emotionally charged environment that characterizes peak times of political turmoil, avoiding counterattitudinal content is as easy as clicking a button (Zhu et al., 2017). The online environment could additionally encourage avoidance because of the heterogeneity of its networks and the higher likelihood of finding *weak ties*—the secondary relationships or discussions people have with individuals outside their immediate circles, such as visitors or strangers—compared with the offline environment (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). Although scholars consider weak ties to have a positive influence on people, based on their ability to expose individuals to diverse viewpoints that do not exist in their primary circles (Granovetter, 1973), the situation could change during conflict and the ensuing emotional political discussions that occur in the online public sphere. John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) argue that on social media, the act of unfriending is a conscious decision of severing weak ties based on offensive or unwanted remarks from people in the network. Research on selective avoidance on social media during conflicts has indeed exposed people's tendency to engage in acts of avoidance. During Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, Facebook use for self-expression and protest information was related to more selective avoidance (Zhu et al., 2017), while in the Middle East, Facebook unfriending during the 2014 Israel–Palestine conflict revealed that selective avoidance occurred more for

the ideologically extreme and politically active users than others (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Because heterogeneous online networks and news-sharing behavior are important for encouraging political participation (Choi et al., 2017), dissonance-driven unfriending bears negative consequences on the heterogeneity of the social groups, resulting in a more fragmented citizenry (Zhu et al., 2017).

Among all social media, Facebook has garnered the most attention because of its widespread use. The 2019 Reuters Institute Digital News Report contends that Facebook is still the leading social network for news, even when people spend less time on it and more time on WhatsApp and Instagram (Kleis Nielsen et al., 2019). In Arab countries, Facebook and WhatsApp are the most used social media platforms, with Facebook usage in Lebanon reaching 84% and WhatsApp usage exceeding 74% (Northwestern University in Qatar, 2019). Since its launch, WhatsApp has been especially popular in Lebanon. With mobile phone penetration in the country being among the highest in the region, the Lebanese have shifted to WhatsApp for its free unlimited messaging and VoIP calling functions. Instead of paying high rates for calls or messages, locals have relied on WhatsApp for both socializing and business purposes, and also for making international calls to the many relatives and friends abroad—a byproduct of Lebanese society that has perpetually produced one of the highest rates of political and economic emigrations. During the recent uprisings, WhatsApp arguably cemented its place as one of the most important social media platforms by demonstrators, who used it to organize themselves and recruit followers. Unlike its regular uses as a private instant-messaging app, WhatsApp was used by large groups comprising weak ties. As such, it is difficult to extend research findings about WhatsApp's ability to increase issue-specific knowledge and produce positive emotions during political discussions (Vermeer et al., 2020) to the current study.

Based on the above research, this study hypothesizes a relationship between selective avoidance and social media news use, in general, and Facebook and WhatsApp, in particular, because of the roles ascribed to these platforms:

H2a: Protest-related Facebook use is positively associated with selective avoidance.

H2b: Protest-related WhatsApp use is positively associated with selective avoidance.

H2c: Protest-related social media use is positively associated with selective avoidance.

One could also expect political disagreements that take place in person to carry over to social media. It might be even easier to engage in political discussions on social media because of the distance and safety afforded by the virtual sphere. During times of political turmoil, however, political disagreements often become emotionally charged (Zhu et al., 2017), and more so for ideologically extreme and politically engaged people who might resort to cutting off ties with those who disagree with them, unfriending and unfollowing them, or hiding their comments on social media (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). This suggests individuals with strong stances toward issues, either from a political or ideological point, are more likely to engage in selective avoidance. Attitude strength regarding political issues is indeed a significant element of selectivity that predicts exposure to both attitude-consistent (Westerwick, Kleinman, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2013) and attitude-challenging media content (Peralta, Wojcieszak, Lelkes, & de Vreese, 2017). Although Garrett (2009) contends people with strong attitudes engage in selective exposure to reinforce

their positions more so than to avoid counterattitudinal content, the nature of the Lebanese protests points to the high likelihood of the latter act. In the highly polarizing case of these protests, individuals' engagement with the protests took a political and ideological slant, mirroring their beliefs in the aim of the protests as well as the beliefs of the political parties. The history of the country itself underlines the deep divisions political parties have created among its citizens even before the 1975 Lebanese Civil War, which have long induced strong positions among the people, often meaning a complete rejection of others' opinions and allegiances, even within the same family. With such long-held grievances played out on social media, it is highly likely that the protests provided people with the impetus to sever ties they had held with others who held rival political attitudes. If the protests offered people who had strong attitudes the right timing to unfriend or block someone with whom they disagree, the situation was additionally favorable for political enthusiasts, particularly those affiliated with political parties. Research has shown that interest in politics and partisanship predict exposure to both attitude-consistent content (Dahlgren, Shehata, & Stromback, 2019) and attitude-challenging content (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Scholars have related the latter finding to individuals' confidence in their attitudes, suggesting they are less likely to be shaken by attitude-challenging content (Westerwick et al., 2013). While this explanation applies to everyday situations, it might not be as relevant in the case of the Lebanese protests, where political beliefs and interests have been traditionally strong. Therefore, based on research about political attitudes and orientations, particularly during conflicts (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), it is plausible that politically oriented individuals could have been motivated to exercise selective avoidance to reduce dissonance stemming from counterattitudinal opinion. Accordingly, the following hypothesis emerges:

H3: Politically oriented individuals, measured by attitude strength (support for the protests), political interest, and party affiliation, are more likely than others to engage in selective avoidance.

Selective Sharing on Social Media

Revealing one's opinion publicly has become quite common in the age of social media. Those with strong beliefs about issues, such as the protesters, could be additionally motivated to openly advocate for their causes, seeing in social media an opportunity to reach various audiences (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018; Lee et al., 2014). In the same manner that people ignore content with which they disagree, they might do the opposite and share agreeable content to "grant legitimacy to the ideas" (Wohn & Bowe, 2016, p. 9). Such behavior could be understood from the perspective of identity theory, which a plethora of studies have placed at the core of media-content selection. In particular, Slater (2015) has argued that people resort to increasing their consumption of attitude-consistent content when their social identity is threatened, "during political campaigns or other times when rival ideologies are becoming salient, or at times of economic or social strain" (p. 373). As these circumstances apply to the Lebanese protests—given the economic strain and political turmoil that beset this country—they suggest people's engagement with attitude-consistent content could extend from selective exposure to selective sharing, with the purpose of keeping the strong identity intact.

In Lebanon, one-third of Internet users believe the Internet increases their contact with people who share their political beliefs (Northwestern University in Qatar, 2019). This view could very well be based on insulated groups of like-minded people. Homogeneous networks might make their members feel that they are part of a group, but their consequences on civic life are dire. Research has documented the value

of exposure to opinion-challenging discussions in heterogeneous networks, summed by their centrality to political deliberation (Garrett, 2009). It follows that social media bubbles are harmful since they not only expose people to attitude-consistent content but also increase the frequency of such content inside the networks (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). Engagement with cross-cutting content, then, promotes new viewpoints and may help fight such filter bubbles (Min & Wohn, 2018). Such opinion-challenging content is found abundantly on social media, especially in the presence of diverse networks with larger access to weak ties. These social networks can become more diverse when the diffusion of content is done at the person-to-person level since this form of sharing reduces selection of like-minded messages (Liang, 2018).

In general, network heterogeneity significantly contributes to political participation, as it interacts with news sharing on social media to influence people's political behavior (Choi et al., 2017). An increase in the frequency of attitude-consistent content also has implications on journalists' news-gathering practices and the social networking sites' algorithmic coding (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). Aruguete and Calvo (2018) found that frequency of similar material indicates trending topics for social media algorithms, thus alerting the system to generate more similar news and to suggest similar content to the users. Their study, based on the Tarifazo protests in Argentina, revealed that social media users framed political discourse by selectively sharing attitude-consistent content. Song and colleagues (2020), however, found that message selection is driven by individuals' previous judgments and not by preference for attitude-supporting content at the expense of attitude-discrepant content.

Although research has revealed general social media use to have a positive relationship with network heterogeneity (Lee et al., 2014), this link is mediated by news-related activities, such as news sharing (Choi & Lee, 2015). To the extent that news sharing is done selectively, being frequently exposed to similar news frames within one's network is most likely to exaggerate the importance of the issue and/or increase the frequency of information that supports this issue (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). Today's savvy social media users, as well as some extremist groups (Melki & Jabado, 2016), are well-aware of the potential of distributing the same type of content frequently and may have used this technique to garner support for the protests or the government. Therefore, to address the mobilization efforts of Lebanese citizens, we tested whether selective sharing exists between supporters of the protests and its opposers as it relates to overall sharing behavior. Based on Aruguete and Calvo (2018) and the above justifications, we pose the following hypotheses:

H4: Among the supporters, (a) sharing news that supports the protests is positively related to overall sharing behavior, whereas (b) sharing news that opposes the protests is negatively related to overall sharing behavior.

H5: Among the opposers, (a) sharing news that opposes the protests is positively related to overall sharing behavior, whereas (b) sharing news that supports the protests is negatively related to overall sharing behavior.

Research on news consumption has identified news sharing to be a construct that consists of news internalization and externalization activities (Choi & Lee, 2015; Choi et al., 2017). As they engage with news content in the online environment, users take part in internalization, such as receiving news, and externalization, such as sharing or posting news (Choi, 2016). Expectedly, both selective sharing and

selective avoidance form a basic component of social media users' news-related activities. Based on the frequent usage of Facebook and WhatsApp during the Lebanese protests, it is highly likely that people engaged in selective news-related activities, sharing specific types of content, and avoiding others. The link between them, however, is still ambiguous. If individuals who share content with which they agree also avoid content with which they disagree, social networking sites will become homogeneous, insulated circles of like-minded people who have little or no tolerance of outsiders. The resulting discussions, as seen earlier, will hamper attempts at reaching political consensus on issues that matter to the public. To our knowledge, no study has explored the relationship between selective sharing and selective avoidance. We therefore raise the following question:

RQ: Is selective sharing related to selective avoidance?

Method

The study conducted a cross-sectional face-to-face survey of adults living in Lebanon through a researcher-administered questionnaire from December 5 to 12, 2019, at the height of the demonstrations.

Sampling Procedure

We calculated a sample size of 1,000 participants based on an estimated population of 6 million (95% *CI*, $\pm 3.1\%$) and used a multistage random sampling technique. To build the sample, we stratified the country into governorates and districts, and selected major cities and towns in each district to ensure representation of all religious sects. We then applied a proportional sampling technique to each district based on the latest election record—the only reliable census records in Lebanon. At the city and town strata, we first selected neighborhoods that represent the typical religious makeup of the area. Then we used a systematic random sampling technique within each neighborhood to select households. Finally, we used the most recent birthday to select the primary respondent from each household. If the person was not at home, we visited the house a second time before declaring it a nonresponse. Moreover, to ensure a sufficient number of respondents from among those who engaged in the street protests, 30% of the sample was selected from within the protesting crowds in major protest locations around the country. Here, we used a systematic random sampling technique depending on the protest size ($n = 3$ for small and medium protests, and $n = 5$ for large protests).

Surveyors encountered some limitations: 6.1% of respondents required a second visit, and 15.3% of respondents refused to participate and had to be replaced (nonresponse rate). Those who made less than the minimum wage (< \$500/month) were overrepresented (55.3%), while those in the high-income category (> \$2,000/month) were underrepresented (1.3%). Because of the economic crisis and the fluctuation of the currency, we deemed the income measure unreliable and did not use it.

Measures

The questionnaire included 24 close-ended questions and required on average 10 minutes. Media use variables followed a four-point ordered response scale measured at the ordinal and interval levels. In

addition to demographics (Table 1), the questionnaire assessed attitudes and behaviors regarding the protests. The internal reliability of composite scales was measured using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1. Sample Demographics and Psychographics.

Gender	Male: 51.4%
	Female: 48.6%
Age	18–22: 18.1%
	23–30: 26.5%
	31–45: 26.7%
	46–65: 24.3%
	> 65: 4.4%
Education	High school or less: 81.7%
	University: 18.3%
Employment	Unemployed: 46.2%
	Employed: 53.8%
Interest in Lebanese politics	Not at all: 15.5%
	Not very interested: 17.3%
	Somewhat interested: 34.9%
	Very interested: 32.3%
Party affiliation	Member: 3%
	Supporter: 25.6%
	Neither: 71.4%

Political Attitudes and Behavior

This set of variables consisted of political party affiliation (party supporter, party member, neither), interest in political news (1 = not at all interested, 4 = very interested), attitude strength that was measured through the degree of supporting/opposing (Peralta et al., 2017; Westerwick et al., 2013) the protests (1 = strongly oppose, 4 = strongly support), and political participation as participation in street protests, where respondents indicated how often they joined the protests in the streets (1 = never, 4 = often).

Social Media Measures

Participants were asked how often they trusted, followed, and shared protest-related news on each of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp (1 = never, 4 = often). For each of the three variables assessing social media actions, we computed a scale that combined all four by averaging their answers. The composite measures yielded the following results: trusting news ($M = 2.6$, $SD = .89$, $\alpha = .83$); following news ($M = 2.2$, $SD = .87$, $\alpha = .74$); and sharing or posting news ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .76$, $\alpha = .79$). Selective sharing was measured by asking participants how often they shared social media with which they agreed. To measure selective avoidance, participants indicated how often they hid/deleted, unfriended/unfollowed, or blocked/reported a post or a comment about the protests that they disagreed

with (Zhu et al., 2017). Although such measures of *unfriending* and *blocking* are extreme acts of avoidance, they are also concrete and tangible actions. We opted to use this as a more valid and reliable operationalization of the avoidance concept, as opposed to the vague measure of *ignoring* or *avoid reading* content—both of which are subject to different interpretations. We computed a new ordinal variable consisting of these three questions. The internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .75. Among the participants, 83.5% reported to have never engaged in selective avoidance, while 8.3% said they had rarely done so. Only a minority reported they had often (4.6%) and always (3.6%) done so. The variable was then recoded into a binary variable.

Results

H1a, which predicted protest-related Facebook use to be positively associated with participation in street protests, was partially supported (Table 2). A binary logistic regression revealed the model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 142.06$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.22$. Both following and sharing news on Facebook were significant, increasing the odds log of participating in street protests.

H1b, which predicted protest-related WhatsApp use to be positively associated with participation in street protests, also was partially supported (Table 2). The model of the binary logistic regression was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 111.79$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.17$, revealing that trusting WhatsApp and sharing news on WhatsApp were significantly related to an increase in the likelihood of participating in the street protests. Similar to the prior tests, Hosmer and Lemeshow's test was significant, indicating the model did not fit well.

H1c, which hypothesized that protest-related social media use was positively associated with participation in street protests, too was partially supported (Table 2). The model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 196.64$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.27$, showing that following social media and sharing news on social media increased the likelihood of participation. Here, as well, Hosmer and Lemeshow's test indicated the model did not fit well. Similar to the previous hypothesis, we tested Twitter and Instagram separately. Sharing news on the two platforms was the only significant predictor of participation in street protests.

Table 2. Logistic Binary Regression Between Social Media Use and Participating in Street Protests (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .001$).**

Facebook		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	0.55	.25	4.89*	1.73
	Sharing	1.41	.18	61.83***	4.1
	Trusting	0.43	.21	4.13*	1.53
		$\chi^2(3) = 142.06***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.22$			
WhatsApp		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	0.46	.26	3.19	1.59
	Sharing	1.17	.17	46.95***	3.26
	Trusting	0.45	.22	4.11*	1.56
		$\chi^2(3) = 111.79***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.17$			
Social media		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	0.35	.13	7.12**	1.42
	Sharing	1.03	.13	60.02***	2.79
	Trusting	0.14	.11	1.46	1.15
		$\chi^2(3) = 196.64***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.27$			

H2a, which posited that protest-related Facebook use predicts selective avoidance, was supported. For protest-related Facebook use, we considered the two variables that asked about following news about the protests and sharing/posting news about the protests on Facebook, in addition to trusting news about the protests on Facebook to serve as a form of control variable. Trust was included based on studies that have shown trusting specific media is related to following them (Kozman, Tabbara, & Melki, 2021; Melki & Kozman, 2020), which could cause internal validity issues if not included alongside the variable *following*. All three variables were recoded into two groups: never/rarely and sometimes/often. The binary logistic regression indicated the model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 126.93$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.23$, where the two main predictors, following and sharing news, were positively associated with avoidance, increasing the log odds of avoidance, which is loosely interpreted as the likelihood of avoidance (Table 3).

Table 3. Logistic Binary Regression Between Social Media Use and Selective Avoidance ($p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).**

Facebook		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	1.11	.36	9.66**	3.04
	Sharing	1.66	.21	60.13***	5.26
	Trusting	-1.15	.26	0.35	0.859
		$\chi^2(3) = 126.93***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.23$			
WhatsApp		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	0.29	.36	0.65	1.33
	Sharing	1.67	.23	51.4***	5.31
	Trusting	0.21	.28	0.57	1.23
		$\chi^2(3) = 99.94***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.17$			
Social media		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
	Following	0.26	.16	0.873	1.3
	Sharing	1.06	.15	49.93***	2.9
	Trusting	0.13	.14	0.87	1.14
		$\chi^2(3) = 155.54***$			
		Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.25$			

H2b, which posited that protest-related WhatsApp use predicts selective avoidance, was partially supported. Similar to H2a, the model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 99.94$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.17$, because of the presence of sharing protest-related news on WhatsApp as the only significant and positive variable.

H2c, which tested all four social media combined was partially supported. The model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 155.54$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.25$. Here too, sharing protest-related news on social media was the only significant and positive variable in the model. These findings, however, must be interpreted with caution since Hosmer and Lemeshow's test was significant, indicating the model did not fit well. To rule out the possibility that the results of the social media composite measure are because of the presence of Facebook and WhatsApp, we also tested Twitter and Instagram use. Both models were significant, with sharing news predicting avoidance on both platforms, whereas following news predicted avoidance only on Instagram.

H3, which hypothesized political orientation (attitude strength, interest in politics, and party affiliation) predicts selective avoidance, was partially supported (Table 4). The model was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 43.86$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.07$. Both, support for the protests (attitude strength) and political interest, were significantly and positively related to avoidance.

Table 4. Logistic Binary Regression Between Political Factors (Attitude Strength, Political Interest, Party Affiliation) and Selective Avoidance (* $p < .05$, * $p < .001$).**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
Attitude strength	1.12	.23	23.47***	3
Interest in politics	0.51	.22	5.68*	1.7
Party affiliation	-1.15			

$\chi^2(3) = 43.86***$
Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.07$

H4a, which hypothesized that, among the supporters, sharing news that supports the protests is positively related to overall sharing behavior, was supported (Table 5). The linear regression model was significant, Adjusted $R^2 = .018$, $F(2,401) = 4.73$, $p < .01$, where sharing news that supports the protests positively predicted the outcome. However, H4b, which hypothesized sharing news that opposes the protests is negatively related to overall sharing behavior among the protesters, was not supported. Testing these predictors on the group that opposed the protests yielded nonsignificant results.

Table 5. Linear Regression of Sharing Pro-protest and Anti-protest News on Overall Sharing Behavior (* $p < .05$).

	Supporters			Opposers		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Protest news	0.21	.1	2.11*	-0.16	.3	-.54
Antiprotest news	0.18	.1	1.83	-0.1	.1	-.84

$F(2,401) = 4.73*$ $F(2,97) = 0.57$
Adjusted $R^2 = .18$ Adjusted $R^2 = -.009$

RQ1 asked whether selective sharing is related to selective avoidance. To test RQ1, we used a binary logistic regression where publishing news that supports and opposes the protests were entered as predictor variables (Table 6). The model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.66$, $p < .05$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.02$. The only significant predictor was publishing news that only supports the protests, which was related to twice the likelihood of avoidance.

Table 6. Logistic Binary Regression Between Selective Sharing and Selective Avoidance (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$).

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp(B)
Protest news	0.64	.23	7.69**	1.9
Antiprotest news	0.31	.23	1.89	1.37

$\chi^2(2) = 8.66*$
Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.02$

Discussion

Examining the theoretical concepts of selective news avoidance and sharing on social media in the context of the Lebanese protests revealed the significant roles frequent protest-related news usage on social media and attitude strength about the protests play in driving people's behavior on social networks and sometimes even on the streets. First, actively sharing news about the protests on social media was related to conscious acts of selective avoidance, as well as physical participation in the protests. Second, strong support for the protests was a major factor in how individuals, especially proprotesters, engaged with protest news on social media, by sharing proattitudinal content and avoiding antiattitudinal ones.

Among all social media users, active users' tendency to avoid counterattitudinal content was consistent across all four platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram). On Facebook specifically, in addition to sharing news, following protest news was related to an increase in the probability of avoiding content on the platform. When some in their Facebook circles posted comments about the protests they did not like, users hid or deleted the comments, unfriended, and/or blocked the people, similar to findings in previous studies on people's behavior on social media during political turmoil (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Further research that delves into the nature of the platform and its use could help clarify the relationship (Boulianne, 2019; Skoric et al., 2016). It is interesting to note that trusting news on social media was not related to selective avoidance. Regardless of whether active users trusted protest news on these platforms, when a post annoyed them, they were more likely than others to avoid these posts. This important finding implies media trust is a separate indicator that is not theoretically related to avoidance.

As a group, active social media users were additionally relevant in their inclination to participate in street protests. Unlike earlier research, this is a strong implication of the ability of social media to drive civic participation. Although people on online platforms actively engage in discussions and promises, these actions do not always translate into actual participation, which gave rise to the terms slacktivism and clicktivism (McCafferty, 2011). The evidence that the current study found of the relationship between sharing or posting news on social media and participation indicates online civic participation can predict offline participation more than any other type of social media use. Two important caveats reframe these findings. First, trust in news on social media did not play a significant role in this relationship, except for WhatsApp, which is quite distinct from the other social media examined. It is the only platform that is directly tied to an individual's mobile phone number. Thus, we would assume WhatsApp networks tend to be more trustworthy than others. Second, following news on Facebook was significantly related to civic participation only for Facebook. This again points to the importance of examining the nature of a social media platform and its relationship to civic participation and to conceptually separate following from sharing on social media—as a more accurate measure of social media engagement and civic participation.

Besides sharing news, support for the protests and interest in Lebanese politics meant less tolerance for attitude-discrepant content, which translated into the act of avoidance. However, this did not apply to people who were supporters or members of political parties, a group we assumed would be die-hard partisans interested in maintaining the status quo. The most likely reason could be the measurement itself, which did not differentiate among the types of parties. This is important since most parties at first publicly supported the protests as a form of solidarity with the people, even when it was evident to all

observers that these sentiments were not genuine. This finding, thus, lends support to John and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2015) findings about the role some political factors, such as extreme attitudes and interest in politics, play in selective avoidance during conflict.

Overall, people with strong attitudes regarding the cause of the protests came out to be an active group that is distinct in its behavior. This was obvious in the manner they handled protest news on social media. Protest supporters were more likely to selectively share attitude-consistent news, but the opposite was not true. While we found a higher likelihood of sharing proattitudinal content among supporters, the relationship between sharing general protest news in general and sharing antiattitudinal content was not significant. Since the relationships were not significant for the group that opposed the protests, we conclude supporters were far more engaged and proactive than the opposers, as well as heterogeneous in their take on the uprising. They took over social media spaces to selectively spread their messages and share news that supported their cause as well as news that opposed it. The explanation is mostly based on the fact that after the first intensive period of protests, where protesters were gathered around one cause—namely fighting government corruption and economic collapse—various factions started to form as the uprising evolved. Another plausible explanation is the changing nature of the protests, which started as largely peaceful but later turned violent, although rarely. These instances most likely did not sit well with citizens who preferred to demand change in a peaceful manner and who were vocal in their disagreements with the violence they believed marred the true cause of the protests. It follows that the antiattitudinal content shared by supporters of the protests was most likely news that condemned the violence that some believed muddled the true cause they were after.

The above interpretation highlights important matters about social media sharing during protests. The diversity and continuous changes that characterize most social movements could explain the penchant to share both proprotest and antiprotest content, which may not necessarily be contradictory. Someone who supports a social movement overall may also oppose certain tactics, views, leaders, and groups that join the movement. Individuals' support may also ebb and flow, depending on many factors during this highly fluid and emotional situation, which may also influence the whole movement, as social media sharing behavior changes. Our findings contribute to research on selective sharing on social media by examining this behavior during heightened political turmoil. Like Aruguete and Calvo's (2018) study, our research found that supporters' selective sharing behavior on social media played a significant role in altering the type of content social media users were exposed to. If we accept social media sharing to resemble political frames, then Entman's (2003) cascading activation model can give further weight to the findings. Therefore, we suggest future research that examines online civic engagement should add selective sharing on social media as another predictor.

Our study relied on self-reported information, which often suffers from social desirability bias. The responses were influenced by a wave of patriotic fervor, and participants underreported their sectarian allegiances and support of political parties. The survey captured attitudes and preferences during the peak of the protests, which changed a few weeks later, after the government collapsed. This, however, does not affect our findings, which specifically targeted this period of high emotions and turmoil. Future research can benefit from longitudinal data that track such changes.

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