



Social network sites and political protest: an analysis of the moderating role of socioeconomic status and political group membership

Redes sociales y protesta política: un análisis del rol moderador del estatus socioeconómico y la pertenencia a grupos políticos



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Abstract:

This research examines the association between the political use of social media and participation in political protest activities at individual level, as well as the moderating effect that socioeconomic status and membership to political groups exert on this relationship. To test the raised hypotheses, the study uses survey data collected in Quito, Ecuador (N = 1520) in 2018. The main results are: i) the use of social network sites (Facebook, Twitter) for the consumption of political information and political expression positively influences protest behaviour; ii) this mobilizing effect is intensified in people of lower socio-economic status and with a higher degree of participation in offline political groups; iii) the strength of the moderation relationships described is modified depending on the digital platform being used politically. Finally, the implications of the findings around the debate on social media, political communication and democracy are discussed.

Keywords:

Political participation; social media; socio-economic status; political protest; political group membership.

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Resumen:

En esta investigación se examina la asociación entre el uso político de redes sociales y la participación en actividades de protesta política a nivel individual, así como el efecto moderador que sobre esta relación ejercen el estatus socioeconómico y la pertenencia a grupos políticos. Para probar las hipótesis planteadas se emplearon datos de encuestas aplicadas en Quito, Ecuador (N = 1520) en el año 2018. Los principales resultados son los siguientes: i) el uso de redes sociales (Facebook, Twitter) para el consumo de información y la expresión política influye positivamente sobre el comportamiento de protesta; ii) este efecto movilizador se intensifica en las personas de menor nivel socioeconómico y con mayor grado de participación en agrupaciones políticas offline; iii) la fuerza de las relaciones de moderación descritas se modifica dependiendo de la plataforma digital que se emplee políticamente. Finalmente se discuten las implicaciones de los hallazgos en torno al debate sobre redes sociales, comunicación política y democracia.

Palabras clave:

Participación política; redes sociales; estatus socioeconómico; protesta política; pertenencia a grupos políticos.

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1. Introduction

The democratic development of countries has been characterized by the inclusion of protest as a normal component of the repertoire of non-electoral political actions available to citizens (DiGrazia, 2014; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Over the past decade, political protest events around the world such as the *indignados* movement and the 15-M in Spain, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, student protests in Chile, *#yosoy132* in Mexico, or the recent demonstrations of yellow vests in France have demonstrated the growing prominence of social media in contemporary political life. In the offline domain, political protest is distinguished from conventional activism for operating outside the institutional channels of participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), its defiant nature with the political system (Dalton, 2008), the expression of nonconformity (Norris, Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2005) and the centrality of the organizational factor for the effective mobilization of collective actions (Anduiza, Cristancho & Sabucedo, 2014). In addition, protest actions are often classified as soft and strong, depending on the potential for violence and its degree of departure from established legal limits (Dubrow, Slomczynski & Tomescu-Dubrow, 2008). Considering these particularities, specialized literature provides increasing empirical evidence compatible with the existence of a relationship between the use of social media and protest behaviour at the individual level (Boulianne, 2015; Chan, 2016; Cristancho & Anduiza, 2013; Lee, Chen & Chan, 2017; Scherman, Arriagada & Valenzuela, 2015).

More specifically, the political use of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter can foster political protest dynamics through two mutually complementary mechanisms: the promotion of favourable predispositions in users and the strengthening of the organizational performance of political groups. The use of social network sites for the consumption and dissemination of political information, the expression of opinions or the involvement in informal discussions on issues of public interest stimulates political learning in individuals, which contributes to the strengthening of political commitment, attitudes and knowledge (Eveland, 2001; Eveland, 2004; Lenzi *et al.*, 2015; Pingree, 2007). On the other hand, digital platforms reduce the costs of organizing and coordinating political organizations and social movements, while the scope of their recruitment efforts is greatly enhanced (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Theocharis *et al.*, 2015).

Deeper research has focused on identifying factors that weaken or intensify the effect of social media, and its political uses, on participation in offline political activities. In addressing political protest, initial empirical findings indicate that the use of these digital platforms produces different mobilizing effects according to the sociodemographic and attitudinal profile of citizens (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2016). Added to this are the interactions explored between individual predictors of protest behaviour and contextual factors such as economic development, social inequality or democratic maturity (Dalton, Van Sickle & Weldon, 2010). In this sense, this study aims to investigate the relationship between the political use of social network sites and participation in protest actions by emphasizing the moderating role that individual variables such as political group membership and socioeconomic status can exercise. Likewise, this research takes place in the Ecuadorian context, which since 2017 is going through a process of political transition resulting from the end of Rafael Correa's term of office (2007 – 2017). A decade marked by low government tolerance in the face of political opposition (Melendez & Moncagatta, 2017). Despite this, episodes of social protest were still present, being associated with issues

such as the oil exploitation of a part of the Yasuní National Park, reforms to higher education, modifications to the penal code, among others (Basabe-Serrano & Martínez, 2014).

2. Social media, digital political behaviour and offline political protest

The digital environment and innovations in communication technologies continually redefine the modes of political action of governments, political organizations, social movements and citizens in general. From a sociological perspective, online political participation is part of a change in the way new generations do politics, who show greater preference for political activities of an expressive and unconventional nature (including acts of protest), as well as linking to a lesser extent with traditional political parties (Calenda & Meijer, 2009). Thus, social networks, and their use as a political tool, have generated beneficial effects both on the usual practices of political groups and on the participation options of individuals. The digital sphere substantially reduces communication costs, enabling political organizations and social movements to expand the scope of their actions in terms of mobilization and recruitment (Krueger, 2006; Theocharis *et al.*, 2015). Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter open up the possibility of spreading large-scale mobilizing messages directly and indirectly (Gibson, 2015; Lee, 2019). The latter involves letting members of organizations take a more active and autonomous role in the creation, personalization or communication of content to mobilize the support of their contacts, with particular relevance to those weak ties that digital social networks allow to make visible and increase (Anduiza *et al.*, 2014; Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen & Wollebak, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012). The messages disseminated via social media partly explain the involvement in political protests of those who decide to support a specific cause spontaneously (Theocharis *et al.*, 2015). As a result, political groups are able to reach the critical mass needed to coordinate collective actions more quickly and at lower cost thanks to the facilities provided by social media (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2012).

At the individual level, the frequency of social media use has been found to be associated with offline political participation. According to the meta-analysis developed by Boulianne (2015) from empirical studies generated in developed and developing countries, the use of social network sites tends to have significant effects on offline political participation, whether of the type conventional or protest. In deepening the explanation of this relationship, the findings of the specialized literature point to the occurrence of mediating processes such as the transition to political use of these digital platforms, whether for informational or expressive reasons. In other words, the more social media presence, the more likely someone is to consume more political information deliberately or incidentally (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016; Choi, 2016; Shah *et al.*, 2007; Tang & Lee, 2013). Similar effect is observed around the expression of political views and opinions (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014; Ji, Zhou & Kim, 2017; Shah *et al.*, 2007; Yang & DeHart, 2016). As a result, informational or expressive political behaviour developed through spaces such as Facebook or Twitter help to promote the individual political dimension, thus increasing the probability to participate in offline political activities (Cho *et al.*, 2009; Jung, Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Lenzi *et al.*, 2015; Wang, 2007; Yamamoto, Kushin & Dalisay, 2015).

From a theoretical perspective, models focused on the study of communication effects argue that the consumption and dissemination of information of a political nature has a positive impact on the political behaviour of citizens. Initial research based on the paradigm of direct communication effects suggests that the use of the media to search for information on

current issues, social, political or public interest issues favours participation in political activities (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). On the contrary, fun- or entertainment-oriented uses have no significant effects (Zhang & Chia, 2006). Subsequent studies have developed communication mediation models to explain the effect of informational uses on participation, recently addressing the social media environment. The O-S-R-O-R (Orientation – Stimulus – Reasoning – Orientation – Response) model formulated by Cho *et al.* (2009) contends that the consumption of political information triggers self-reflective and mental processing processes that are necessary for further political involvement. These cognitive processes in turn tend to be stimulated by expressive behaviours and discussion with others about the revised topics, being contributing factors to political learning. In this regard, the study of Jung *et al.* (2011) focused on the uses of the internet found that the search and dissemination of hard news indirectly influences the political behaviour of users through the expansion of their knowledge about public affairs, social issues and the political process.

In addition, the compositional efforts demanded by the publication of opinions, as well as the deliberative component of the discussions that can be triggered later, are elements that also contribute to the strengthening of political engagement and knowledge. For Pingree (2007) the political expression is composed of three underlying mechanisms that impact the sender: pre-expression expectation, message composition, and message release effects. Together these stages motivate critical reflection, learning new content, mental elaboration and commitment to the opinions expressed. At this point, social networks generate favourable conditions in terms of costs, scope and immediacy for the development of expressive behaviours. Based on the assumptions of the theoretical model of differential gains, the variety of expressive activities that facilitate social network sites stimulate significant political learning (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015). This effect is not only because interpersonal communicative contexts promote greater awareness and interest on current events, social issues and the political content discussed, but also motivate users to seek additional information and weigh different perspectives in order to make higher quality arguments, anticipating disagreements that may arise (Eveland, 2004; Pingree, 2007; Shah *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, political learning positively influences individual feelings of political self-efficacy, which in turn stimulates participatory behaviours (Jung *et al.*, 2011; Heiss & Matthes, 2016).

In short, the reported processes are expected to elevate the willingness of users to behave politically. Previous research presents among its findings positive effects on the part of the informational and expressive uses of social media on offline conventional and protest political participation (Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Ardevol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés, 2019; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015; Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014; Zumárraga-Espinosa, Reyes-Valenzuela & Carofilis-Cedeño, 2017).

3. The moderating role of political group membership and socioeconomic status

Literature increasingly provides insight into the mediating processes that explain the impact of social media on online and offline political participation. However, it remains to be specified the factors that can condition the intensity of the mobilizing effects produced by the political use of these platforms. Empirical research shows that individual variables such as personality traits, civic education, or political values interact with the relationship between general use of social

media and conventional political behaviour in the offline environment (Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Xenos, Vromen & Loader, 2014). This relationship also tends to be conditioned by properties of the user's digital social network, such as its size or heterogeneity (Campbell & Kwak, 2011). In addressing the political use of digital platforms, it has been observed that the expressive use tends to increase the effect of informational uses (reading news on political or social issues, visiting online forums or sharing political content, among others) on offline political participation (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015). The interaction effect has been theoretically explained from the differential gains model (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). In the case of political protest, the findings made by Valenzuela *et al.* (2016) from data from seventeen Latin American countries suggest that aspects such as gender, age, political ideology and interaction with social organizations moderate the relationship between the informational political use of social network sites (Facebook, Twitter and Orkut) and participation in protest actions. It has also been observed that the inclination towards postmaterialist values in cultural terms does not constitute a significant moderator (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012).

According to the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) the availability of cognitive and material resources (money, time and civic skills), just as links with associations of a political nature are important predictors of offline political participation. However, there is a possibility that these factors also condition the mobilizing impact of political use of social media over offline participation, including protest behaviours. The incorporation of the digital sphere into political life has been accompanied by optimistic and pessimistic views on the internet's potential for strengthening democracy. From an optimistic perspective, the online environment offers a less expensive alternative to participation in political activities. This facilitates the political mobilization of those who have been inactive offline because of their resource constraints (Krueger, 2002). On the contrary, the pessimistic perspective proposes that the internet and advances in communication technologies tend to be exploited by the same people who are politically active offline. In other words, the available resources continue to play a decisive role in seizing the opportunities provided by the digital sphere in terms of political action (Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2010).

Several researches have been proposed to verify these conflicting theses, finding in some cases that while aspects such as education and income level continue to positively influence online political participation, their effect tends to be less than exercised on offline activism (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012; Winneg, 2009). Once access to the Internet is available, resources cease to limit digital political behaviours (Anduiza, Gallego & Cantijoch, 2010). In addition, the emergence of a sector of the population that, being inactive at the offline level, reports online political behaviours has also been observed (Nam, 2012). Other studies have even found that individuals with lower socioeconomic status tend to report higher online participation (Krueger, 2002; Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2010; Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019; Zumárraga-Espinosa, Carofilis-Cedeño & Reyes-Valenzuela, 2017).

The findings suggest that the internet and social media could contribute to greater democratization of political participation among members of society. In this regard, empirical research developed by Morris and Morris (2013) shows that internet use has a strongest impact on the political behaviour of those in the lowest socioeconomic strata. A tentative explanation proposes that people with lower education and income derive greater benefits in terms of learning and consolidation of political attitudes thanks to the facilities provided by the Internet. This makes sense because the digital space substantially reduces the difficulties that disadvantaged groups traditionally faced in accessing information and news on public affairs,

having opportunities for expression of views and political discussion, or contact with organizations of a political nature (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Oser, Hooghe & Marien, 2013). It should be noted that although the entire population benefits from the cost-cutting of political participation in its online modality, it is the people of lower socioeconomic status who experience the most important changes around their ability to develop the above behaviours. On the contrary, the most advantaged social sectors have enjoyed greater opportunities to express themselves, inform themselves and maintain connections with political actors or associations since the pre-internet period (Best & Krueger, 2005; Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995).

Added to this is the ability of social network sites to stimulate digital political behaviours in people with lower incomes, lower education and little interested, putting in place mechanisms such as incidental exposure to political information and mobilizing stimuli (Kim, Chen & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013), availability of permanent audiences for expression of the individual political voice (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014) and expansion of social capital in interactive environments (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009). The above coincides in part with the research conducted by Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) from representative samples from different European countries, where incidental exposure to political information via social media was found to be more intensely related with online political participation when it comes to people who reported less interest in politics. This reasoning suggests that the informational and expressive uses of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter may produce differential gains in cognitive and attitudinal terms, benefiting people with lower socioeconomic status to a greater extent. Thus, these differential gains increase more strongly the willingness to participate politically in the less favoured social groups. If such a democratizing effect occurs, political use of social media would be expected to stimulate offline political participation more intensely in those citizens with less socioeconomic status. This would also apply to political protest behaviours.

On the other hand, political groups are suitable spaces for the cultivation of interpersonal ties and contact with other organizations that share common interests (Schussman & Soule, 2005). With their arrival, the internet and social network sites have not only drastically reduced the communication costs of political organizations and social movements, they have also brought a more decentralized character to their operation, creating opportunities for its members to take a more active and autonomous role in promoting organizational objectives (Gibson, 2015; Theocharis *et al.*, 2015). Such conditions could intensify the cognitive and attitudinal positive effects generated by political use of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter.

First, the consumption of political information via social network sites acquires higher mobilizing quality for those belonging to offline political groups. This is because political groups operate as mobilization networks through which information directly linked to the development of political initiatives and activities in the real world circulates, such as invitations, calls, proposals for action, meeting places, activist agendas, among others (Best & Krueger, 2005; Carty, 2010; Lemert, 1981; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014). Given these conditions, the informational use of social network sites by those belonging to political groups has a greater mobilizing information burden.

Second, *offline* political groups have a number of characteristics that favour the cognitive and attitudinal processes associated with both political expression and discussion. Although the relationship between membership of civil society

organizations and social capital has been studied for a long time (Putnam 2000), Conroy *et al.* (2012) emphasize that political groups promote political participation through two mechanisms: (a) the creation of stimulating conditions for political discussion and (b) mutual control of members' activities and contributions. However, the interaction that takes place on social media sites only reproduces the first mechanism properly, while the possibilities of control suffer limitations due to the lack of face-to-face contact. In this sense, the digital expression of opinions is more likely to be feedback thanks to the contributions of the other members of the organization, who share an interest in politics as opposed to the rest of the contacts list.

This raises the propensity to participate in electronic discussions on political issues for those who belong to offline political groups, even more so if these groups are present on social media. Membership of offline political groups therefore ensures to a greater extent that the informational and expressive uses of social network sites generate favourable returns in terms of political learning, civic engagement and group identity. Aspects of vital importance for the gestation of collective actions, particularly necessary for political protest (Schussman & Soule, 2005; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012).

Additionally, although users are more inclined to include similarly thinking people in their contact list, which has been defined as social selectivity (Campbell & Kwak, 2011), offline political groups limit to some extent this possibility. Although in general, those who make up a political organization or social movement share common interests, this does not imply that there can be heterogeneous points of view and opinions when more specific issues are addressed. In this regard, studies have shown that the deliberative quality of political discussion increases when there is heterogeneity of views, which in turn improves the gains of political knowledge (Mutz, 2002). Finally, political messages generated by members of organizations through social network sites are likely to have a greater mobilizing burden. As mentioned, social media allows members of political groups to become more actively and autonomously involved in boosting organizational agendas. Thus, members have greater incentives to generate mobilizing stimuli from the political use of their Facebook or Twitter accounts. Mobilizing actions may be directed to other members as messages that propose, convene or promote action, or to non-militant users for recruitment purposes (Gibson, 2015; Gustafsson, 2012). According to the findings of Rojas and Puig-i-Aprial (2009), people who develop mobilization efforts towards others are more likely to engage in offline political participation activities. In short, the sum of the processes described suggests a strengthening of the connection between political behaviour via social media and participation in protest activities for those linked to political groups.

The presented discussion, based on the integration of theoretical and empirical contributions from specialized literature, allows to substantiate the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Political use of social media is positively related to political protest behaviour.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The relationship between political use of social media and political protest behaviour is moderated by socioeconomic status.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The relationship between political use of social media and political protest behaviour is moderated by political group membership.

In order to carry out a conservative test of the relationships proposed, the effect of a set of predictors that are conceptually related to political protest will be controlled. Based on the explanatory theories available in the literature it is possible to group the individual determinants of protest behaviour into four broad categories: nonconformity, individual resources and limitations, political attitudes and recruitment opportunities (Dalton, Van Sickle & Weldon, 2010; DiGrazia, 2014; Schussman & Soule, 2005). In the case of non-conformity with the performance of government and social problems, variables such as external political efficacy and negative emotions regarding the social and economic situation of the country are included. Individual limitations refer to those factors capable of increasing the cost and risks of participating in protest actions, which is why they act as restrictions on such behaviours. This category covers the sociodemographic characteristics and occupational situation of citizens. Likewise, the availability of material and cognitive resources is required to face the costs of political participation. For this point, the socioeconomic status variable is considered. Among the political attitudes consulted are internal political efficacy, interest in politics and political ideology. It includes the consumption of traditional media as a factor capable of altering the attitude of users towards protest movements (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009). Finally, membership of political groups acts as an indicator of contact and exposure to recruitment efforts of political organizations or social movements.

4. Method

4.1. Sample and procedure

This research used data from a sample of 1520 participants based in the Metropolitan District of Quito (DMQ), Ecuador. Non-probabilistic sampling was carried out, however, quotas by gender and zonal administration were introduced to increase the representativeness of the population of Quito in demographic and geographical terms. The study involved 765 men (50.3%) and 755 women (49.7%). 55.7% of the sample reported ages 18 to 29 years, 25.7% from 30 to 44 years, 16.6% from 45 to 64 years and 2% from 65 years and up. The average age was 31.9 years ($SD=13.0$). The level of education of the participants was distributed as follows: 0.3% without formal instruction, 0.7% incomplete primary, 3.3% full primary, 5.4% incomplete secondary, 5.1% full secondary, 4.5% incomplete high school, 25.3% full high school, 30.7% incomplete university, 21.2% full university and 3.5% have postgraduate studies. Monthly household income was recorded on a scale with intervals ranging from “385 USD or less” (19.9%) up to “3474 USD or more” (2.8%), mode was in the “386 to 771 USD” segment (27.4%). The data comes from the Opinion and Political Participation General Survey developed and applied periodically by the Psychosocial Research Group of the Salesian Polytechnic University (GIPS-UPS). The collection of information took place between the months of June and July 2018 with the help of university students. Prior to the application of the instrument, participants were briefed on the confidentiality protocols and objectives of the study.

4.2. Variables

Protest behaviour: It was evaluated from 6 items corresponding to the following political protest activities: participating in strikes or unauthorized demonstrations, taking part in collective protests, refusing to pay taxes, blocking traffic, participate in the occupation of public buildings, boycott or deliberately purchase products for ethical, environmental or economic reasons. The frequency of participation in each of the protest activities was measured through a 5-point valuation scale ranging from 1 (*I have never done it and would never do it under any circumstances*) to 5 (*I have done it many times*). The individual protest behaviour index was calculated by summing the reported scores per item ($M=8.77$; $SD=4.12$). The scale used has a satisfactory level of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).

Political use of social media: Five types of political behaviour that can be developed via social media were consulted, focusing attention on informational (receiving content and news related to political issues) and expressive behaviours (writing political opinions; responding or commenting on views expressed by other users; sharing images, links, videos and other content related to politics or electoral processes; chatting with others on political or electoral issues). The frequency of participation in each activity was measured by a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). The behaviours reported were examined with respect to the Facebook and Twitter platforms. From the sum of the responses per item, indexes of political use were built for both the case of Facebook ($M=8.42$; $SD=4.00$; $\alpha=0.89$) as Twitter ($M=7.12$; $SD=3.61$; $\alpha=0.93$), in addition to an aggregated index for the two platforms ($M=15.54$; $SD=6.95$; $\alpha=0.93$).

Political group membership: The degree of offline involvement of participants with 9 types of groups of a political nature was assessed. Contemplating political parties, trade unions, professional associations, women's associations, environmental organizations, animal rights groups, among others. The relationship with each political group was measured by response options ranging from 1 (*I have never been a member*) to 4 (*I am a member and actively participate*). The political group membership index was obtained by adding the scores assigned to each item ($M=10.80$; $SD=3.82$; $\alpha=0.89$).

Socioeconomic status: First, each participant's equivalent net income was obtained by dividing household income for the reported household size (Castillo, Miranda & Cabib, 2013). Assuming socioeconomic status as the combination of income and schooling (Morris and Morris, 2013), the product between equivalent net income and level of education was obtained, the resulting values were standardized to z-scores ($M=0$; $SD=1$).

Political efficacy: For the external dimension, 4 items were used that evaluate the individual perception of the degree of responsivity and interest of the political system towards citizen demands and proposals. In the case of the internal dimension, the 4-item scale formulated by Niemi, Craig and Mattei (1991) was adapted to measure self-perceived competition by the individual to participate in political actions and achieve the proposed objectives (Zumárraga-Espinoza, 2020). In all cases the response options ranged between 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). In addition, the respective indexes of external political efficacy ($M=10.96$; $SD=3.95$; $\alpha=0.85$) and internal political efficacy ($M=10.30$; $SD=3.42$; $\alpha=0.81$) were obtained.

Negative emotions: Eight items were included to examine negative emotional responses to the current situation in the country. The emotions consulted were: contempt, hate, fear, resentment, anxiety, anger, shame and bitterness. The rating

scale used ranges from 1 (*Nothing*) to 5 (*Extremely*). The values were added to calculate the respective additive index ($M=16.94$; $SD=7.01$; $r=0.88$).

Occupational situation and sociodemographic characteristics: It was coded with the value of 1 to those who reported not being doing paid work, the value 0 was assigned to other cases. The gender and age of the participants were also recorded.

Interest in politics: With response options ranging from 1 (*Not at all interested*) to 4 (*Very interested*) the following question was asked: How interested would you say you are in politics? ($M=1.34$; $SD=0.91$).

Political ideology: Starting from a scale ranging from 1 (*Left*) to 10 (*Right*), participants were asked to select the value that best represents their political position ($M=5.28$; $SD=2.09$).

Use of traditional media: The frequency with which participants use traditional media to inform themselves about political, public interest or current affairs issues was consulted. Measurements were made for the case of written press, television and radio. Responses were reported based on a rating scale that ranges from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). The scores assigned to each medium were added for the generation of the corresponding aggregate index ($M=7.05$; $SD=2.73$; $r=0.83$).

5. Results

The empirical evaluation of the research hypotheses was based on the construction of multivariate regression models, assigning the role of dependent variable to participation in offline activities of political protest. The parameter estimation was carried out by ordinary least squares. Model 1 is composed of the following predictors: political use of social media, socioeconomic status, political group membership, interactions and the rest of the control variables considered. It should be noted that the index of political use of social media integrates the Facebook and Twitter platforms. Likewise, to contrast the moderation relations proposed in H2 and H3, two interaction terms are used: political use of social media x socioeconomic status and political use of social media x political group membership.

The results of the regression analysis performed are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the political use of social media is positively related to individual protest behaviour ($\beta=0.340$, $p < 0.001$), providing empirical support for H1. Predictors of interest also include socioeconomic status and political group membership. In the case of socioeconomic status, there is a significant and positive effect on participation in protest activities ($\beta=0.133$, $p < 0.01$), being the most educated and with greater income availability who have a greater predisposition to adopt this type of behaviours. Similar effect, although of greater magnitude, occurs in relation to membership in political groups ($\beta=0.162$, $p < 0.01$). Socio-economic status, political group membership and other control variables explain 28.6% of the variations in the level of participation in protest actions. On the other hand, the political use of social media contributes with an explained variance of 12.5%.

Table 1. Multivariate regression of political protest behaviour

	Model 1 β
<i>Control variables</i>	
Gender (Male)	0.034
Age	-0.057**
External political efficacy	0.031
Negative emotions	0.058**
Occupational Situation (Not working)	0.044*
Interest in politics	-0.003
Political ideology	-0.011
Internal political efficacy	0.009
Use of traditional media	-0.041
Socioeconomic status	0.133**
Political group membership	0.162**
R²	28.6%
<i>Social media</i>	
Political use of social media (Facebook and Twitter)	0.340***
R² Incremental	12.5%
<i>Interactions</i>	
Political use of social media x Political group membership	0.202**
Political use of social media x Socioeconomic status	-0.155**
R² Incremental	0.7%
R² Total	41.8%
Note: *p < 0.05 (5%); **p < 0.01 (1%); ***p < 0.001 (0.1%). Standardized regression coefficients are presented	

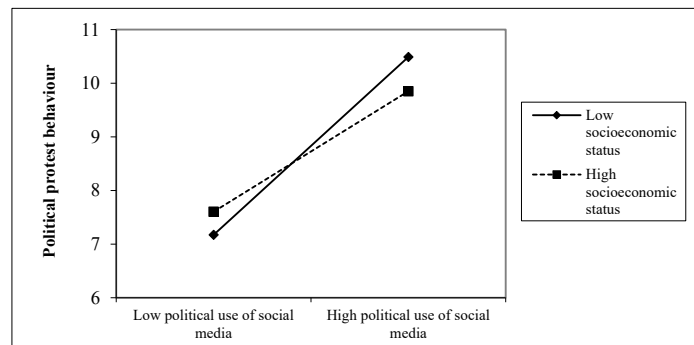
Source: Data collected by GIPS-UPS. Quito – Ecuador. June – July, 2018. Own elaboration

As for the moderating role of socioeconomic status and political group membership, the terms of interaction introduced in the regression analysis yield statistically significant results. This implies that the effect of political use of social media on protest behaviour changes significantly in the face of variations in the socioeconomic status of individuals ($\beta = -0.155$; $p < 0.01$). Similarly, this relationship between political behaviour via social media and political protest is conditioned by the degree of membership of political groups ($\beta = 0.202$; $p < 0.01$). In order to analyse the nature of the moderation relationships detected, simple slope tests were carried out, based on the recommendations and digital resources provided by Dawson (2014). The simple slope test estimates the effect of a predictor on the dependent variable based on different levels of the moderating variable. For the selection of the conditional values of the moderator, the “pick a point” criterion of one

standard deviation below (- 1 SD) and above (+1 SD) of the mean will be taken as a reference (Preacher, Curran & Bauer, 2006). In this way it is possible to evaluate the interest relationship at relatively high and low values of the moderator.

With regard to socio-economic position, the tests carried out show a negative moderation pattern. When socioeconomic status takes on a relatively low value (-1 SD), the effect of political use of social media on protest behaviour is greater ($\beta=0.239$; $p < 0.001$), but this effect decreases ($\beta=0.162$, $p < 0.001$) in the case of a relatively high socioeconomic level (+1 SD). Therefore, as people's education and income levels become lower, political use of social media tends to stimulate participation in political protest activities more strongly (see Figure 1). The relationship between political use of social network sites and political protest is generally significant, unless the values (z) of the moderator (*socioeconomic status*) are within the range of 3.01 to 12.30. For the estimation of the region of significance described, the online procedures and tools provided by Preacher *et al.* (2006) were applied, with a confidence level of 95%.

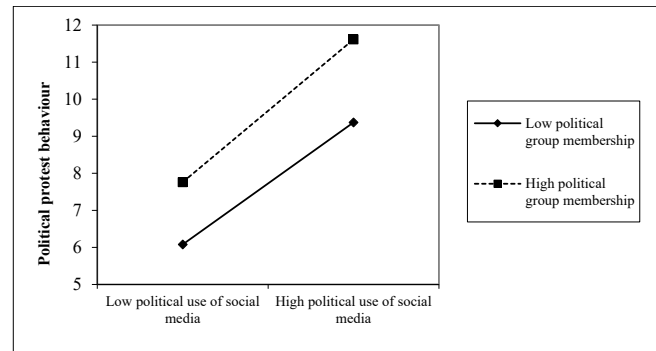
Figure 1. Moderating effect of socioeconomic status on the relationship between political use of social media and protest behaviour



Source: Data collected by GIPS-UPS. Quito – Ecuador. June – July, 2018. Own elaboration

The analysis of simple slopes for membership in political groups suggests a positive moderation pattern. When the moderator (*political group membership*) takes a relatively high value (+1 SD), the relationship between the political use of social media and participation in acts of protest intensifies ($\beta=0.277$, $p < 0.001$), instead this relationship it weakens ($\beta=0.237$, $p < 0.001$) if the moderator adopts a relatively low value (-1 SD). Consequently, the mobilizing effect of social media political use on protest behaviour is strengthened as individuals become more involved with political groupings in the offline sphere (see Figure 2). The relationship between political use of social network sites and political protest is significant for any positive value of the moderator examined.

Figure 2. Moderating effect of political group membership on the relationship between political use of social media and protest behaviour



Source: Data collected by GIPS-UPS. Quito – Ecuador. June – July, 2018. Own elaboration

Finally, specific regression analyses were carried out with the purpose of evaluating the effects of Facebook (model 2) and Twitter (model 3) separately. Table 2 presents the results obtained. While the two platforms significantly influence protest behaviour when used politically, regression coefficients suggest that Twitter ($\beta=0.346$, $p < 0.001$) has a greater mobilizing effect than Facebook ($\beta=0.179$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, the interaction terms introduced in each model show that the previously identified moderation patterns are preserved by disaggregating the political use of social networks by platforms. Socio-economic status has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between the political use of each social network site and the adoption of protest behaviours. While the moderating effect of political group membership describes a positive pattern, be it Facebook or Twitter. However, the contrast made indicates that the moderating effect of socioeconomic status is intensified in the case of Twitter ($\beta= -0.145$, $p < 0.01$), while membership in political groups moderates more strongly the mobilizing effect of political use from Facebook ($\beta=0.264$, $p < 0.01$). In summary, the set of tests carried out allows to verify H2 and H3.

Table 2. Multivariate regressions of political protest behaviour. Disaggregated effects for Facebook (model 2) and Twitter (model 3)

	Modelo 2 β	Modelo 3 β
<i>Control variables</i>		
Gender (Male)	0.040	0.039
Age	-0.081***	-0.068**
External political efficacy	0.050*	0.023
Negative emotions	0.071**	0.074***
Occupational Situation (Not working)	0.044*	0.044*
Interest in politics	0.003	0.021
Political ideology	-0.011	-0.013
Internal political efficacy	0.028	0.014
Use of traditional media	-0.023	-0.009
Socioeconomic status	0.085	0.117**
Political group membership	0.191***	0.203***
R²	28.6%	28.6%
<i>Social media</i>		
Political use of Facebook	0.179**	
Political use of Twitter		0.346***
R² Incremental	7.3%	12.4%
<i>Interactions</i>		
Political use of Facebook x Political group membership	0.264**	
Political use of Facebook x Socioeconomic status	-0.098*	
Political use of Twitter x Political group membership		0.144*
Political use of Twitter x Socioeconomic status		-0.145**
R² Incremental	0.6%	0.6%
R² Total	36.5%	41.6%

Note: * p < 0.05 (5%); ** p < 0.01 (1%); *** p < 0.001 (0.1%). Standardized regression coefficients are presented.

Source: Data collected by GIPS-UPS. Quito – Ecuador. June – July, 2018. Own elaboration

6. Discussion

Previous studies have made significant progress in identifying the conditions that make it possible for the use of social network sites to connect with the adoption of protest behaviours at the individual level. In this line, the inquiry of mediating and moderating variables becomes increasingly relevant. With regard to mediation mechanisms, specialized literature agrees that social media is more likely to stimulate offline political behaviour when there is political use of these platforms. In this regard, the results show that users who use their social network sites for political activities such as information consumption, expression of views or interpersonal discussion, tend to participate more frequently in actions of political protest. Replicating, in this sense, the findings made by previous research on the relationship between the political use of social media and protest behaviour (Enjolras *et al.*, 2013; Macafee & De Simone, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012; 2016), in addition to providing more detailed empirical evidence regarding Facebook and Twitter.

This work also expands the literature on factors that moderate the relationship between social media and political protest. In the first instance, it was observed that the political use of social network sites more strongly mobilizes participation in protest events for those belonging to lower socioeconomic strata, a phenomenon that intensifies for the *Twitter* platform. This suggests that while the informational and expressive behaviours deployed via social media produce attitudinal and cognitive benefits that increase the predisposition to participate politically, these gains differ according to the socioeconomic level of users. In the face of this, Morris and Morris (2013) outline an explanation for such differential gains based on Baum's gateway thesis (2003), proposing that the most educated and higher-income people tend to be more informed and involved politically prior to contact with the political benefits of the Internet, given its greater ease of engaging in participatory activities and intervening in political communication processes through different offline channels. In other words, people with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to behave politically, which is largely explained by their availability of material, cognitive and attitudinal resources. While the political use of social media plays a complementary role, which is why it would have a rather small impact on such a predisposition.

On the contrary, since people with lower socio-economic status tend to be more disassociated from the offline political process, the internet and social media are perhaps the only avenue of access to inform, communicate and act politically, generating greater cognitive and motivating benefits. Benefits that lead to more intense changes in the propensity to intervene in offline participatory activities. In this order of ideas, the findings propose that online social networks exert a democratizing effect on offline protest-type activism, adding to similar results achieved by previous analyses focused on conventional political behaviour (Morris & Morris, 2013). A democratizing role that would therefore go beyond the digital mobilization of those on the margins of political life, also putting them on the way to more far-reaching forms of participation in the real world.

Likewise, membership in offline political groups has a moderating effect on the relationship between political use of social network sites and protest actions. Thus, the expressive and informational political behaviours that take place in social network sites produce a greater effect on protest behaviour when people have greater links with political organizations or social movements, a phenomenon that occurs with greater force when dealing with Facebook. Starting from the

theoretical review carried out initially, the moderating role observed in political group membership can be explained through 3 specific mechanisms.

First, the list of contacts on Twitter or Facebook of those who belong to offline political groups is also integrated by other members of these organizations, setting up an audience with similar political interests and concerns. Under these conditions, expressive acts have greater opportunities for feedback, while discussions are more likely to acquire deliberative quality if they take place between users who share membership, due to prior face-to-face contact (Wright & Street, 2007). This would end up reinforcing the mental processes associated with expression (Pingree, 2007) and interpersonal political discussion (Eveland, 2004), which subsequently lead to offline participation.

Second, the information consumed via social network sites has a greater mobilizing burden for members of political groups, being more exposed to receiving different types of invitations to enlist in offline political activities. Mobilizing information especially relevant to the gestation of collective protest actions (Valenzuela, 2013), which may come from the political group to which it belongs, or from other related associations with which it is possible to interact through online groups created through social media sites.

Third, political group membership encourages the adoption of a more active role in the political communication process. On the one hand, online discussions that take place between members of the same group require the other members to express their opinions and points of view, especially if the group has an online version on social media (Conroy *et al.*, 2012). In addition, the decentralized functioning that political organizations and social movements have adopted through the internet and social network sites encourages their members to contribute more actively in promoting organizational objectives, while being more likely to express their support and disseminate mobilizing information on social media, as well as targeting recruitment efforts towards their digital contacts.

Finally, it is pertinent to note that this study has limitations associated with the use of cross-cutting data and the operationalization of key variables. In this sense, it is required that future research confirm, from longitudinal information, the causal directionality suggested by the results set out herein. Similarly, it is recommended to explore in greater depth other political uses of social network sites such as interaction with online political groups, the use of memes as forms of political humour, among others. It is also necessary to assess the extent to which the observed relationships are modified by disaggregating the analysis of protest behaviour by specific activities such as unauthorized demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, traffic blockage, etc.

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