

FOMO, CLICKTIVISM AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT – THE CASE OF GEORGIA

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Abstract

In today's digital era, social media has become a central arena for political discourse and activism. Platforms now serve as critical tools for shaping narratives, connecting politicians, activists, and citizens, and mobilizing collective action. In Georgia, for instance, Meta groups have been used to coordinate resistance campaigns and protests against government decisions; X functions as a space for real-time political commentary; while Instagram and TikTok are increasingly leveraged for campaign movements, particularly targeting younger audiences. On one hand, these platforms enhance political participation by enabling rapid communication and the spread of messages to wide audiences. On the other hand, they raise concerns about "clicktivism"—forms of online activism that may substitute for meaningful political involvement (Christensen, H. S. (2011)—and the risk of fostering political apathy, including disengagement from public events and elections (Zhel'nina, A. (2020). An additional psychological factor that may shape this dynamic is the fear of missing out (FOMO). Research by Przybylski et al. (2013) shows that FOMO is associated with higher levels of behavioral engagement with social media. This suggests that political activity online may not always stem from deliberate civic motivation but rather from an anxiety-driven desire to remain included in digital conversations. This study seeks to examine the mediating role of FOMO and clicktivism in the relationship between social media use and political engagement in Georgia. By focusing on this context, the research will provide the systematic attempt to explore how digital habits, psychological drivers, and forms of online participation intersect to shape political engagement. The first step is to provide a sound framework.

Keywords: *Clicktivism, FOMO, political engagement, political psychology, social media.*

1. Introduction

Political engagement encompasses actions designed to influence the choice of governing actors, including citizens' voluntary activities of knowing and influencing political choices at various levels of the political system (Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Kaase & Marsh, 1979; Riley et al., 2010). Political participation and influence are the main key words here: to fully define political engagement mere exhibit of interests in politics is not enough. More recently, modern scientific literature has raised the additional question while testing different forms and levels of political engagement. More specifically: whether online political activities, which take just a keyboard and a mouse click, can be considered as politically legitimate and meaningful civic actions or not (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Some authors refer to online political engagement as clicktivism, arguing that such online activities do not translate to offline actions and do not result in substantial social or political changes in real life (e.g., Christensen, 2011; Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2004). Recent meta-analyses of FOMO and social media use (Fioravanti et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021) and more specifically, Przybylski et al. (2013) showing that "FOMO is associated with higher levels of behavioral engagement with social media" (p. 1847) give ground to suggest that people with high FOMO levels are more likely to participate in various political activities and events online. According to Przybylski et al. (2013), FOMO is "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (p. 1841). This leads to the desire to always be in touch with what other people are doing. This feeling, in return, drives excessive use of social media to stay connected with other people to be informed about and participate in different social (and/or political) activities (Przybylski et al., 2013). Although some political scientists (e.g., Kakabadze, 2025) have noticed that in Georgia "many citizens, particularly youth and middle-class groups, express their concerns through participatory politics such as street demonstrations or online platforms; however, deeper forms of engagement—like voting,

joining political parties, or advocating through institutional channels—remain low”, still such studies lack more fundamental and consistent analysis of political behavior. “FOMO, clicktivism and political engagement – the case of Georgia” has all potential to fill up this gap.

2. Research framework & methodology

To explore the interplay between individual thoughts and behaviors and social influences, the pilot study rests on three key social psychological theories, which form the framework through which the findings are being analyzed.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957): Explains how individuals feel discomfort when holding conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors and are motivated to reduce this dissonance.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): Describes how people evaluate their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to others.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978): Focuses on the part of a person's self-concept that derives from their membership in a social group.

More on the political psychology side, to better explore group dynamics and how the social and political factors shape behavior, the pilot study keeps in mind:

Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1967): Deals with how people explain the causes of their own and others' behaviors.

Construal-Level Theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998): Explains how people think about objects and events in the past, present, and future.

Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997): Differentiates between two motivational orientations - (i) a promotion focus on gains and (ii) a prevention focus on losses.

Further, to explore how digital habits, psychological drivers, and forms of online participation intersect to shape political engagement, the study chose and adapted 5 different scales of (i) political alienation (consists of 3 subscales); (ii) FOMO; (iii) Online and (iv) Offline political engagement and (v) Helping attitudes.

Helping Attitudes Scale (Nickell, G. (1998) is a measure of respondents' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors associated with helping.

Scales of online and offline political engagement are adapted based on WVS (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) and scientific literature connected with clicktivism.

This pilot study employs the Milbrath Hierarchy of Political Participation (1965) extended to the digital realm by George and Leidner (2019), which structures online action into three tiers: Digital Spectator, Transitional, and Gladiatorial Activities. The study's primary focus is the low-cost, low-effort end of the spectrum: Digital Spectator Activities. This category encompasses actions signaling political support, notably Clicktivism.

Clicktivism is defined as a "low-risk, low-cost activity via social media", characterized by its noncommittal and easily replicated nature, examples of which include liking posts, following causes, changing profile pictures, and signing online petitions. E-petitions are included here as they enable citizens to overcome the marginal costs associated with traditional participation. The pilot study also measures Assertion, a higher-effort activity within the Spectator which involves creating and disseminating original content (text or multimedia) concerning political issues. Conversely, the pilot study explicitly excludes the Digital Gladiatorial Activities tier. This highest level of activism—which includes Hacktivism and Exposure (leaks)—involves direct action, high resource commitment, and substantial personal risk. These high-risk activities were deliberately excluded from the study instrument for security and ethical reasons. This methodology ensures the focus remains exclusively on low-to-medium threshold online participation.

The Fear of Missing Out Scale (Przybylski, et al., 2013) was developed in the context of advancing an empirically based understanding of the fear of missing out phenomenon via everyday experiences.

Political alienation rests on feelings of estrangement from the political system and a lack of engagement therein. Political alienation (Schwartz, D, 2007) could result from not identifying with any particular political party or message, and could result in revolution, reforming behavior, or abstention from the political process. This study utilizes 3 expressions of political alienation: political powerlessness; political normlessness and political isolation.

The pilot study is guided by a central research question: Does activity on social networks reduce political alienation, or conversely, does it reinforce it? This question probes the core of the clicktivism debate. It explores whether engagement on platforms like Facebook serves as a remedy for political apathy by providing accessible avenues for participation, or whether it acts as a mechanism that perpetuates feelings of powerlessness by substituting low-impact digital actions for more demanding, high-impact forms of civic engagement. Answering this question can be crucial for understanding the future of civic society in an increasingly digitized world.

3. Procedure and demographics

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed for the pilot study. The final sample comprised N=144 respondents.

Today, the central question in Georgia's political arena addresses the condition of the educated, employed population: why do they express anxiety on social networks yet fail to openly align themselves with any tangible cause—whether it concerns questions regarding education reform or the halting of the country's EU integration path?

The demographic profile of the sample is distinctive and responds to this important context for the findings. The sample is predominantly composed of:

Gender: Women (>60%).

Age: Individuals in the 35-54 age group.

Education: Highly educated individuals, with a majority holding a Master's degree.

Employment: Primarily employed in the private sector.

Location: Mainly located in the capital city, Tbilisi.

Data was collected using a multi-component, anonymous, self-administered questionnaire. The instrument incorporated five standardized scales to measure the core constructs:

Online Activity: A hierarchical scale measuring various forms of digital participation, from low-effort clicktivism to high-effort assertion ($\alpha = .916$).

Offline Activity: A scale measuring engagement in traditional forms of civic action (e.g., voting, demonstrations, petitions) ($\alpha = .787$).

FOMO (Fear of Missing Out): A 10-item scale measuring social anxiety related to being out of touch with events and social updates ($\alpha = .812$).

HAS (Prosocial Behavior): An 18-item scale measuring altruistic attitudes and the motivation to help others ($\alpha = .756$).

Political Alienation: A standardized scale, based on Dean's (1956) conceptualization, measuring feelings of powerlessness, normlessness, and social isolation ($\alpha = .778$).

The research instruments demonstrated high internal reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha scores exceeding the standard threshold of 0.7 for all major scales. The "Online Activity" scale was particularly robust, showing an exceptionally high level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .916$).

The collected data were analyzed using a combination of statistical methods within the SPSS software package:

Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and Crosstabulations were used to generate a detailed portrait of the sample's civic behaviors and attitudes.

Correlational Analysis: To test the relationships between variables, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) was employed, suitable for ordinal data and non-linear relationships.

Associational Analysis: Chi-Square tests and Linear-by-Linear Association tests were used to examine the statistical significance of associations between categorical variables.

Factor Analysis: To connect variables and test concepts.

4. Hypothesis testing and key findings

The pilot study tested six primary hypotheses. The results are as follows:

H1: Clicktivism and Alienation (Supported) – Online activity does not reduce the sense of powerlessness. The Linear-by-Linear Association test revealed a statistically significant relationship ($p=.017$), indicating that as clicktivism increases, the sense of powerlessness also tends to increase. This might suggest that symbolic online actions are ineffective in overcoming alienation and may even be a symptom of it.

H2: Substitution Principle (Refuted) – Online activity does not replace offline activity but complements it. The Chi-Square test showed a highly significant positive association ($p < .001$) between online activities (e.g., "liking" a post) and readiness for offline engagement (e.g., attending a demonstration). This might suggest that active citizens appear to utilize all available means of participation.

H3: FOMO as a Driver of Engagement (Supported) – FoMO appears to be a primary psychological catalyst for activism. This might suggest that the anxiety associated with missing out drives both online and offline engagement, rather than causing apathy and alienation.

H5 & H6: The Paradox of Helping Others (Refuted) – An extremely high prosocial disposition does not protect respondents from political alienation (H6 refuted) or reduce their reliance on low-effort clicktivism (H5 refuted). On the contrary, high prosociality is positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety (**H4 confirmed**), a finding that likely points to the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue."

This might suggest that altruistic and political motivations may be separate, and sometimes conflicting, constructs in this context.

The statistical analysis (N=144), utilizing Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) and Factor Analysis, might be suggesting to probe into three major paradoxes regarding the effectiveness and psychological cost of digital participation.

1. **H1 Paradox: The Vicious Cycle of Clicktivism and Powerlessness (Confirmed)** – The primary finding might be pointing to a problematic relationship: low-effort engagement does not alleviate political alienation but is associated with its increase. While 50.69% of respondents exhibit High Clicktivism, 65.52% report High Powerlessness. The Linear-by-Linear Association ($p=.017$) confirms a positive trend between the frequency of symbolic online activity and feelings of powerlessness. Spearman's analysis highlights the vicious cycle: "Wasting Time" (passive behavior) shows a strong negative correlation with "Feeling Inner Peace" ($\rho=-.622^{**}, p<.001$) and a positive correlation with "Anxiety" ($\rho=.229^{**}, p=.006$) and "Feeling Uncertain" ($\rho=.370^{**}$). This reinforces the idea that symbolic action might be failing to mitigate alienation, instead reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of anxiety and ineffectual participation.

2. **H2 Paradox: Complementarity and the Hierarchical Barrier (Substitution Rejected)** – The pilot study rejected the substitution theory, reinforcing the idea that online engagement complements offline action, yet Factor Analysis (explaining 64.91% of total variance) revealed a critical structural barrier. Active citizens adopt a hybrid approach. Linear-by-Linear Association confirms strong links between Clicktivism and Demonstrations ($p<.001$) and Online vs. Physical Petitions ($p<.001$). Furthermore, high-effort Assertion significantly links to Demonstrations ($p=.04$). Despite these links, a deep gap exists. While Online Petitions are popular (46.53%), high-effort Assertion (original content creation) is critically low at 13.89%. This four-fold difference might be marking a high psychological barrier preventing the transition from "Digital Spectator" to "Creator". This is supported by the strong negative correlation between "Wasting Time" and "Enjoying Help" ($\rho=-.585^{**}, p<.001$), indicating that passive users might be struggling to cross the threshold into active, meaningful engagement.

3. **H6 Paradox: Altruistic Burnout (Rejected)** - While 96.55% of the sample reports extremely high prosocial motivation, H6 (that altruism reduces alienation) is rejected. The data might be indicating what we call "Compassion Fatigue". "Satisfaction with Helping" correlates positively with "Worrying about the Future" ($\rho=.224^{**}, p=.007$), and "Helping with Money" correlates with personal financial stress ("Returning Money", $\rho=.505^{**}$). However: the strong negative association between "Wasting Time" and "Feeling Great" ($\rho=-.585^{**}$) implies that highly motivated individuals, when facing systemic obstacles, experience frustration and emotional depletion rather than empowerment.

4. **The Role of FOMO (H3 Confirmed)** - FoMo seems to be a critical catalyst, characterizing 75.86% of respondents. While it drives activity (linked to "Checking," $\rho=.315^{**}$), it functions primarily as anxiety management and fails to solve the underlying feeling of isolation, a basis for what we call a "Competent but Anxious Observer."

5. Limitations of the study

The primary constraint of the pilot study lies in Sample Representativeness. The study employed a non-probabilistic, convenience sampling method (N=144), resulting in a sample heavily skewed toward highly educated women (>60%) in the middle-age cohort, overwhelmingly residing in Tbilisi. Consequently, the findings reflect the attitudes of a specific, competent urban stratum and cannot be generalized to the broader Georgian population.

Furthermore, reliance on self-reported, anonymous questionnaires introduces social desirability bias. This bias is evident in the HAS scale, where 96.55% of respondents reported extremely high altruistic attitudes, potentially inflating favorable attitudes rather than reflecting genuine behavioral commitment, thus influencing the finding of "Altruistic Burnout."

6. Discussion

This pilot study (N=144) set a stage to further investigate what might be defined as the critical paradox of Georgia's digital democracy, revealing that while social media mobilizes the educated urban class through mechanisms like FoMo, it fails to translate into effective political power. The central finding confirms a "vicious cycle" where widespread engagement in low-effort Clicktivism (50.69%) does not mitigate alienation; instead, empirical data shows a significant positive association ($p=.017$) between passive online activity and the feeling of powerlessness.

Another tendency worth further examining might be the subtle finding that the digital participation might be further constrained by a severe hierarchical barrier. While the "Competent but Anxious Spectator"

might be dominating the landscape, the transition to high-effort engagement could be stalled, evidenced by the critically low rate of Assertion (13.89%). High prosocial motivation, rather than empowering citizens, currently seems to correlate with anxiety and emotional burnout.

However, at this stage these findings must be viewed as a foundational first step only. Given the sample's skew toward highly educated women in Tbilisi, the results offer a deep dive into a specific influential stratum rather than a generalized national picture. Consequently, future research phases are set to expand this framework to include broader demographics—particularly men, rural residents, and Gen Z—and (preferably) utilize longitudinal designs to establish causality. We believe deepening this inquiry is essential for developing strategies that can eventually transform the digital anxiety of the electorate into meaningful, high-impact political engagement.

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