TECHNOLOGY’S ROLE IN ENCOURAGING YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

Political participation is a vital aspect of the American democratic process. Although the Millennial generation is the future of our country, young adults have traditionally been the least engaged age group. Theories such as the Civic Volunteerism model have attributed the participation disparity to the lack of benefits that young people receive from the political system involvement. Others have cited the exclusion of youths from political campaigns as a contributor to disengagement. However, in the past decade, the percentage of youth voters has raised to around 50 percent in tandem with social-media integrated political campaigns that successfully targeted Millennials. As such, this study analyzes how young adults are using new technology and social media to engage with politics, and how their online participation affects their political behavior offline. Specifically, it looks at how social media relationships between a user and an acquaintance and a user and an official account relate to offline participation. Results reinforce previous findings that political social media use is associated with political attention and in-person political discussion. Results also suggest a relationship between offline participation and information seeking after viewing social media posts. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, American youths are less likely to participate in political behavior. Scholars (e.g. Delli Carpini 2011, Walker, 2006, Galston, 2001) have found that politics as a traditional and formal process is often inaccessible to youths, and thus excludes them from the process. According to Verba et. al’s (1995) civic volunteerism model, young citizens also do not participate because they possess the least amount of resources, and extract the least value from participation (Delli Carpini, 2000; Dudash, 2007). The youth “cycle of neglect” (Walker, 2006) is reflected in the low 1992-2000 youth voter turnout. However, in tandem with the use of social media and technology in political campaigns, youth voter turnout has been on an incline in the past three election cycles. The existing literature (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) has found that technology can better facilitate political behaviors. However, these studies reflect mostly an older population. Because of the significant recent increase in youth voter turnout, it is important to measure how youths are using technology and social media to enhance their political experience.

The present study synthesizes existing literature to provide an overview of past youth political participation and how it is changing with the inclusion of new media in the political realm. It also defines how new online communication acts fit in with models of traditional political participation. Hypotheses will analyze how young people today are using the Internet to become politically engaged by measuring how their social media and online participation affects their political engagement. The
analysis is strengthened by measures of political attention, information-seeking, discussion, efficacy, knowledge, and interest.

**YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

A “Cycle of Neglect”: The Exclusion of Youths from the Political Realm

In order to understand the importance of the recent incline in youth political participation, it is essential to review what factors have contributed to their traditional disengagement in the pre-social media era. Political participation is defined as an individual’s activity that seeks to influence government action (Verba et al., 1995), or the “activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government officials, or the policies of government (Conway, 2000, p. 3).” America derives a “healthy” and balanced public sector from regular participation (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Conway, 2000), however many are discouraged from participating because they do not perceive a lack of results. According to Rolfe (2012), “Voting is understood as a fundamental act of the American citizen,” and, “all good Americans by definition should vote in elections . . . . children are taught that the birth of the American nation was a fight for the right to vote (p. 46-49).” Youth voting is extremely important, especially to politicians in close elections. Because youth political views are newly formed and their party identification yet solidified, they comprise their own class of extremely valuable
“swing voters” (Walker, 2006, p. 29). However, as evidenced by research and voter turnout, youths are the chronically uninvolved generation.

Youths have been traditionally less knowledgeable and interested in politics, less likely to vote (Rahn & Transue, 1998), and more cynical than older generations (Delli Carpini, 2000). Young citizens are also less likely to donate money or volunteer for a political group, contact a public official, discuss politics in person, or generally follow politics and current affairs (Walker, 2006). The lack of young American voters in the 1992 through 2000 presidential elections both confirmed perceptions of youth involvement and raised concern for the future of political participation (Cooper, 2000). According to The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, youth voter turnout from 1992 to 2000 dropped from previous cycles and remained low, ranging from only 36.1 percent to 48.6 percent. The low participation of Millennials stands in stark contrast to the 63.6 to 72.4 percent of adults age 30 and older who voted in the 1992 to 2000 elections (CIRCLE, 2010).

A way of looking at participation that can account for the lack of youth voting is the exchange of a citizen’s inputs and outputs. Inputs are the acts a citizen does to try to influence official decisions, and outputs are the extractions, or benefits, he or she receives from the system (Milbrath & Goel, 1982). However, many citizens, especially young people, do not extract enough value from their outputs to employ inputs (Delli Carpini, 2000; Cooper, 2000). The balance between participation inputs and result outputs can also be described as civic volunteerism (Verba et al. 1995), or the cost-benefit analysis that motivates citizen behavior. According to the Civic Volunteerism Model, there are certain resources necessary for a person to participate in politics, such as time, money, and skills. If a person has more resources, participation becomes
easier, and it is more probable that he or she will become civically involved. Because youths are equipped with fewer resources, and are less affected by changes in less societal outputs such as public services, public order, and economic opportunity (Milbrath & Goel, 1982), they receive extremely low benefits from participation in contrast to older generations, and are less inclined to participate.

The inputs and outputs frame of participation encompasses why youths are traditionally less politically engaged. A more recent study found that students ages 18 to 30 reported a lack of efficacy in voting and political interest, while older generations were motivated by community involvement (Dudash, 2007). In sum, the political participation gap (Delli Carpini, 2000) can be attributed to young Americans’ lack of “maturity” comprised by professional interests and stability factors such as home ownership, marriage, and family responsibilities (Galston 2001, p. 219). This is also consistent with the finding that nonvoters do not see election issues as relevant to their lives (Dudash & Harris, 2011). The participation gap has traditionally been regarded as part of a “life cycle” that youths would naturally outgrow with maturation. However, the definable decrease in youth political engagement became an increasing concern when it did not seem self-remedying as originally anticipated (Galston, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2011).

Other scholars postulate that youth disengagement is not merely a product of a generational life-cycle issue, rather a result of a “cycle of neglect (Walker, 2006, p.27),” or perpetual exclusion of youths from the political realm. That is, because youths have not been traditionally involved in politics, political parties and campaigns have put less effort in to targeting their votes. The formalities of political organizations excluded issues of youth concern and were not targeted in an accessible
way to them (Delli Carpini, 2011). According to Walker (2006), “Young voters, particularly, are left behind in the political process, as their traditional lack of voting turnout has caused political leaders to invest less time in courting their votes. In turn, young people ignore them (p. 27).”

The Turning Point in Youth Political Engagement

However, the increase of young American voters in the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections marks a turning point in the participation gap. According to CIRCLE, the amount of youth voters in the last three presidential elections increased from 46.7 percent, to 48.5 percent, to 50 percent (2012). Recent research (e.g. Anduiza et. al, 2009; Krueger, 2002; Delli Carpini, 2000; Walker 2006) has attributed the youth voter increase to the new forms of media that are reshaping the political communication sphere. The Internet is capable of reaching out to less active members of the public sector, especially youths, whose needs were not formally met by more traditional forms of participation (Anduiza et. al, 2009). The accessibility of political information to youths on social media platforms has the potential to affect youth political behaviors both on and offline (Krueger, 2002; Delli Carpini, 2000). Walker (2006) identifies the recent campaigns’ inclusion of young adults through technology and social media as the first step toward breaking the “cycle of neglect” (p.27). Around 50 percent youth voter turnout has been deemed the “new normal” for presidential elections (CIRCLE, 2012), an indication that the youth disengagement cycle may have the potential to change (Dudash & Harris, 2011). An overview of the political sphere’s
new media trends will provide necessary context for how youths use media today, and what impact this use can have upon their behavior.

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Although new media such as the Internet, smartphone apps, or social media are frequently used to access news today, many Americans still rely primarily upon traditional news sources for political information. However, their use of the Internet and social media sites continues to increase. A Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism study asked American adults about which forms of media they used to track the 2012 presidential campaign, and found that 41 percent regularly used cable news, 38 percent local news and 36 percent newspapers. However, 36 percent reported that they used the Internet most regularly, and 17 percent used social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to follow the 2012 election. Although people who rely most upon social media is much lower than those who use the traditional media and Internet; the number of those using social media to track the election nearly doubled in only nine months, from five percent using Twitter in January to nine percent in October, and from 20 percent using Facebook in January, to 32 percent in October (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). Moreover, a 2012 Pew Internet Project survey discovered that 80 percent of adults use the Internet and 66 percent these Internet users also access social networking sites. Seventy-five percent of social network users reported that their friends post “at least some content related to politics” and 37 percent actually post political content themselves (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012).

Gurevitch, Coleman, and Blumler (2009) refer to the recent influx of new media use as a “reconfigured media ecology (p. 172),” which has shifted traditional
the media role of the citizen as a passive viewer to a constantly informed citizen who can participate in the political process and send his own messages (Micheletti et al., 2004). The Internet provides people with an inexpensive way to express their opinions, generate content, and interact with the media, which can ultimately make them more politically informed, confident, and participatory citizens (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009; Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

Information Overload?

Some scholars have pointed out the negative effects that widespread Internet use could have on political participation. For example, it has been argued that the immense availability of information is overwhelming to its users and is only conducive to surface level investigation and discussion separate from politics (Shah et al., 2005). Others similarly warn that the wealth of Internet content forces citizens to become “self-seeking” consumers who will not actively choose to expose themselves to well-rounded information and will thus become less engaged (Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Another possible negative consequence of Internet use is civic disengagement (Muhlberger, 2003; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Coleman, Morrison, & Svennevig, 2008). The civic disengagement theory does not deny the Internet’s capability to motivate people to become more active citizens, but states that the government has not become more responsive to their concerns. This lack of response could lead to citizens who feel “technologically connected, but politically disconnected (Gurevitch, Coleman, Blumler, 2009, p. 174),” which could further discourage them from participating.

However, what are interactive technological and social media platforms like the New York Times iPhone app, Mitt Romney’s Twitter account, or Joe Biden’s
Facebook page, if not a remedy to the formal atmosphere that once excluded young people from the political discourse? Anduiza et. al (2009) has called the Internet a “driving force” (p. 864) to motivate those neglected by classic participation institutions that do not satisfy their needs, particularly young people. Scholars cite that online participation can play a role in decreasing the generational participation gap, because it gives young people a more realistic way to voice their political opinions (Anduiza et. al, 2009).

How Politicians Reach the “Internet-literate” Generation

Studies have confirmed that youths use the Internet more often and for more diverse reasons than any age group (Lariscy, Tinkham & Sweetser, 2011). According to a 2008 Pew study, younger people are the most “Internet-literate” generation, as well as the most likely to consume new media at an accelerating rate (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). Although Millennials only account for 30 percent of America’s total adult population, they comprise 35 percent of Internet users, and 82 percent of wireless Internet users. Millennials are also 83 percent more likely to use social networking sites than older Internet users and have the highest majority of blog users. Importantly, 82 percent of young people reported getting news online on a typical day (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010).

Politicians have become aware of technology and social media’s capacity for reaching young voters, and have taken advantage of this opportunity. For example, the 2004 presidential election saw the highest youth voter turnout in a decade, which scholars have attributed to “increased youth voter outreach projects” (Dudash &
Harris, 2011, p. 471; Walker, 2006; CIRCLE, 2004). Youth outreach tactics include Internet campaigns, text messages, and contact directed primarily toward cell phone owners, who are primarily young adults (Mock, 2004). According to Dudash and Harris (2011), the 2004 election was differed from previous ones because “the younger citizens felt invited to the discussion” (p. 477). Walker (2006) also corroborates that the 2004 election was a turning point for youth involvement in politics, “Young people gave us an opening in 2004 and demonstrated that they will participate when they are invited to and when their voices are heard (p. 29).”

The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections successfully used social media’s two-way communication to circumvent media gatekeepers and communicate directly with citizens (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). In 2008, the Obama campaign used social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as well as an Apple iPhone application to organize youth voters and share news updates and photos. The iPhone app allowed users to find local political activities they could get involved with, such as canvassing, phone bank calling, as well as policy briefings and debates (Cogburna & Espionza-Vasquez, 2011). According to a 2012 Pew study, Obama’s successful 2012 campaign posted almost four times more content than Romney’s campaign on twice as many platforms. Citizens were extremely responsive to Obama’s outreach—his posts received twice as many responses in shares, views, likes, and comments (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). Most notably, the Obama campaign produced the most popular tweet of all time; an image of Barack and Michelle Obama embracing in celebration of his election win, with the caption “Four more years.” The image was re-tweeted by users over half a million times (International Business Times, 2012). Researchers have linked the increase in youth
voter participation to the Obama campaign’s ability to provide instant mobile campaign updates and volunteer opportunities. According to some scholars, this innovative use of technology “politically galvanize[d] younger Americans” (Bettelheim, 2008, p.1),” and is one of the reasons that Obama won the 2008 election, with 8.4 million more youth votes than McCain (Fraser & Dutta, 2009). Although the figures show that Obama’s 2012 campaign had a wide and powerful reach, scholars are currently investigating how Obama’s new social media tools further contributed to his success.

Scholars have argued that youths will not realistically use the Internet for political purposes, and that increased internet use leading to increased political involvement is not feasible (Putnam, 2000; Shah et al., 2005). However, others (Pichardo, 1997; Buechler, 2000; Cogburna & Espionza-Vasquez, 2011) have cited the new social movement theory (NSMT) as evidence that the internet-motivated youth political mobilization phenomenon is actually possible. NSMT links people’s behavior to their motivation to partake in a social movement, such as the 2008 youth galvanization. In this case, the youth culture’s technological behaviors can feasibly lead to a social movement, which is political participation (Cogburna & Espionza-Vasquez, 2011). This literature supports the claim that it is possible for technology to play a role in young adults’ political process.

**POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AS POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Scholars have not cohesively defined specific online political behaviors as either acts of communication or acts of participation. While participation is defined as an attempt to influence government actions (Verba et al. 1995), communication is the process of creating and interpreting messages to evoke a response (Griffin, 2009), or
“the dissemination of information between parties” (Hoffman, 2012, p.220). Thus, political communication is the exchange of messages conveying political information between a nation’s leaders, media, and its citizens (Hoffman, 2012; Perloff, 1998). A dialogue has always existed between political leaders and constituents. However, under forms of traditional media, the relationship was hierarchical in that the leader was the primary emitter of messages, and the citizen was the receiver (Yildiz, 2002). However, the interactive capacity of new media works toward eliminating hierarchies, because it allows for “multiple-participant-based communication” (Polat, 2005). The Internet provides countless opportunities for constituents to communicate politically. Thus, it is important to distinguish which acts can be considered acts of communication, and which are acts of political participation.

Wells and Dudash (2007) consider voting the ultimate mark of political involvement, while information gathering activities comprise a lesser-valued civic engagement distinction. Verba et al. (1995) consider acts participatory when they are “information-rich,” or seek to send an “explicit message” to representatives, such as strategically contacting public officials, candidates, or government parties with their requests, issues, or problems, volunteering on a campaign, or protesting (p. 221). Hoffman (2012) identifies that the issue with past participation definitions is that traditional information-rich activities do not have an equivalent in today’s new media sphere. As illustrated by previous examples, today’s technology and social media platforms enable constituents to interactively communicate with their representatives and stay constantly informed. Hoffman (2012) defines these behaviors as a new form of online political participation, which are information-rich and seek to directly or indirectly reach politicians and candidates (222). The present study is particularly
important because it seeks to examine how the “Internet-literate” generation participates politically online, and how it affects their offline political behavior. Additionally, literature in this area has yet to explore the relationship between young adults’ specific social media activities and their political behaviors both on and offline.

Social Media Relationships

Scholars and research organizations like Pew have explored how social media relationships influence online political behavior. However, no studies have examined how specific social media behaviors translate into further information-rich activities both on and offline. For example, Pew’s Internet & American Life Project (2012) investigated whether SNS users commented or refrained from commenting on their friends’ dissenting political posts. It also asked whether SNS users were surprised to learn about their friends’ political orientation through the posts, commented positively, blocked, or “liked” friends’ political posts, or chose to friend or follow a person who shared their views. This study seeks to investigate how following a politician on different social media platforms affects political attention, information-seeking, and political discussion. The most similar current data (e.g. Delli Carpini 2011, Walker, 2006, Galston, 2001) is strongly concentrated in the older generations, but the present study will add to what we know today about the group that was formerly most marginalized from the political process. The unique findings are enriched by measures of political attention, information-seeking, discussion, efficacy, knowledge, and interest.
Facebook and Twitter: Two Dominant Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms such as Tumblr, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, and Spotify are widely used today, and were used by both Obama and Romney’s 2012 campaign to engage citizens (The New York Times, 2012). However, scholars have identified Facebook and Twitter as the most powerful content sharing sites despite their differences. Ellison, Lampe, and Lin (2007) state that Facebook’s friend network capability can be extremely effective in spreading information and encouraging participation. van Jaarsveldt (2012) has also found that political activity on Facebook and mobile devices can motivate online information seeking and political engagement. Kwak et al. (2010) has identified Twitter as a weaker content dissemination source, partially restrained by its 140-character limit, but stated that each tweet can reach a potential audience of 1,000 people (Kwak et al., 2010). van Jaarsveldt’s (2012) did not find Twitter to be as likely to motivate political behavior. However, van Jaarsveldt’s (2012) study was limited because it only sampled 79 Twitter users. As van Jaarsveldt encourages, the present study includes a higher number of Twitter users and a more equal number of both Facebook and Twitter users.

VARIABLES RELEVANT TO ONLINE PARTICIPATION

A review of variables relevant to online political participation provides the necessary framework to interpret hypotheses testing. Primarily, it is important to understand political attention’s role in shaping political participation as framed through past research. Conway (2000) categorizes political attention as a communication activity, or a “passive” form of political participation. Verba et al. (1995) also marks a clear distinction merely paying attention to politics versus actually practicing it. However, more recently, Bennett et al. (2012) explain attention to forms
of “public life,” such as community issues or political actions, as an important precursor to political engagement. According to the scholars, information communicated by the media, political candidates, or social movements can result either motivating or undermining political action. As Lane (1965, p. 876) states, “Just because people pay attention to politics does not mean that they feel politics is important to them, but people who feel that politics is important are most likely attentive. Likewise, people who desire to learn about politics also probably pay attention.” Despite the lack of consensus on whether paying attention to politics is a form of participation or its antecedent, it is likely to play a role in predicting engagement, and will be explored in this study’s hypotheses.

Similar to political attention is political information-seeking. Milbrath and Goel (1982) categorize information-seeking as an important aspect of communicative participation which requires high levels of education. Contrastingly, the low-information rationality thesis (Popkin & Dimock, 1999) defines information seeking as a precursor to participation. According to Popkin and Dimock (1999), people with low levels of information cannot follow public issue discussion, cannot make informed political decisions, and are less likely to participate in politics. Xenos and Moy (2007) found that the Internet can directly affect political information seeking and interact with political interest and knowledge to positively affect participation. This study will further explore how seeking information about politics online interacts with other variables to predict youth engagement.

Political discussion is also important to participation. Milbrath & Goel (1982, p. 87) define political discussion as a “verbal interchange,” that involves citizens
sending messages of protest, support, or viewpoints to politicians or the media and informing others about politics. Verba et al. (1995) also describes political discussion as a verbal skill, in which a citizen successfully conveys their ideas to others.

According to Milbrath & Goel (1982), those who participate in informal political discussions are more prone to vote and participate politically than those who do not discuss politics. Scholars have since found that Internet use (Bimber 2003, 1999; Mossberger et al. 2008) positively contributes to political discussion.

New media also has the potential to change youth political interest. Political interest has been defined as “the degree to which politics arouses a citizen’s curiosity,” or “the relative importance of political matters compared with other activities (van Deth, 2000 p. 119). But scholars (Shani, 2007) have more recently called political interest one’s desire to learn about and participate in politics. Campbell (2006) has argued against the causation between political interest and participation, stating that people may be motivated by a sense of civic duty more than by their actual interest in political affairs. Studies (Gerber, Green, and Shachar 2003; Plutzer 2002) have also shown that people may vote out of pure habit, regardless of their political interest. However, there is emerging evidence that increased political interest can yield increased participation activities and ultimately “improve democratic government (Holleque, 2011, p. 2).” Multiple scholars have discovered that political interest can lead to a higher acquisition of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Luskin 1990), and is moreover one of the most significant predictors of political participation (Verba et. al, 1995).

Consistent with the political participation age gap, past literature details higher levels of interests in older people than in younger people. Studies (Bennett, 1986;
Glenn & Grimes, 1968) have found that young people are the age group least interested in politics. Patterson (2002) also claimed that young adults are not only the least politically interested, but also the least politically informed of any age group. However, just as the Internet is improving young people’s attainment of political information, Xenos and Moy (2007) recently found weak, yet significant evidence of its ability to increase political interest. Xenos and Moy’s (2007) model found that youths who view political information online have higher interest than online information alone, indicating that Internet use may have a significant, although indirect, affect on political interest. In accordance with Holleque (2011)’s study rationale, this study found it prudent to gauge political interest by asking about the participant’s interest in the election. Analyzing interest on a short-term basis is practical because it isolates a specific instance in which scholars can study and “exert some control” over the circumstances (Macedo et al., 2005). According to Holleque (2011, p.2) “Elections are a special time in American politics, when not only is politics particularly interesting, but also when political elites invest vast quantities of resources to encourage people to be interested and participate in politics. Under these circumstances, we might expect to see someone change his or her level of political interest.” The present study aims to strengthen the evidence of Internet use as a potential motivator of political interest, particularly in an election where an increasing amount of youths used the Internet for political news.
HYPOTHESES

Based upon the literature, I propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Political social media use will be associated with attention to the 2012 election.

H2: Political social media use will be associated with in-person political discussion.

H3: There will be a relationship between offline participation and (a) political information-seeking after seeing a personal acquaintance post about it on Facebook, and (b) political information-seeking after seeing a an official account post about it on Facebook.

H4: There will be a relationship between offline participation and (a) political information-seeking after seeing a personal acquaintance post about it on Twitter, and (b) political information-seeking after seeing an official account post about it on Twitter.
Chapter 2

METHODS

The data for the present research come from a Qualtrics Software survey conducted from November 2 to November 5, 2012. The researcher randomly selected 1,500 respondents from a list of 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students at a large Eastern university. The list was provided to the researcher with approval from the university Registrar’s Office. Respondents were notified about the survey through an email invitation on data collection days. The final sample in this study includes 140 voting-age college and graduate students, resulting in a 9.3 percent response rate. Although names and email addresses were collected in order to send the survey, all information and responses were kept confidential. The Human Subjects Board granted the study an exemption on October 31, 2012.

Forty-five percent of respondents described themselves as liberal or very liberal, 39 percent moderate, and 16 percent conservative or very conservative. The respondents were also 73 percent female, and students of each of the university’s academic colleges, as well as various graduate programs.
MEASURES

FOLLOWING THE ELECTION

Following the election was gauged by how closely a respondent followed the 2012 election on a five-point scale, with 5 indicating very closely (M = 3.58, SD = 1.08).

INFORMATION-SEEKING

Social-media motivated information seeking was measured by asking the frequency in which political discussion on SNS channels led respondents to seek further information, with 1 indicating never and 5 indicating very often (M for personal acquaintance Facebook = 2.31, SD = 1.27; M for personal acquaintance Twitter = 1.69, SD = 1.22, M for official account Facebook = 2.02, SD = 1.24; M for official account Twitter = 1.72, SD = 1.16). Information seeking also included respondents who reported they have posted comments about politics on a social networking site, and who revealed which candidates they preferred via social networking, or signed up as a “friend” of candidates (N=156). Respondents were also able to provide other influences that motivated them to seek further political information besides the response options provided.

POLITICAL DISCUSSION

Political discussion was measured by asking respondents whether they communicated about politics using email never, 2-3 times a month, once a week, 2-3 times a week, or on a daily basis. (M= 1.53, SD = .090), text messaging (M = 2.04, SD = 1.17), SNS (M=2.07, SD =1.34), the telephone (M=2.08, SD = 1.19), or by talking in-person to people (M= 3.37, SD = 1.24). Respondents were also asked if they talked
to people about a political topic and / or tried to show them why they should vote for or against one of the presidential candidates (N=81)

OFFLINE PARTICIPATION

The measure of offline participation encompasses young adult political activities adapted from Hoffman and Thomson (2009), as well as traditional participation measures (Milbrath & Goel, 1977). Respondents answered “yes” (1), or “no (0),” to whether they had completed any of nine activities in the last six months: 1) participated in a student government or debate team; 2) attended a speech or debate on, for example, a political, economic, environmental, cultural, or social topic; 3) participated in a political club on campus (e.g. College Republicans or Democrats); 4) worn a campaign button or T-shirt, put a campaign sticker on your car, or placed a sign in your yard for or against a particular candidate; 5) signed any petitions (online or on a hard copy) to show your support for or against any candidate or policy; 6) went to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners or things like that in support of a particular candidate; 7) did any other work for one of the parties or for a candidate (such as going door-to-door, walking in a parade, petitioning or making phone calls); 8) contacted a political official (e.g. representative or senator); and 9) talked to people about a political topic and/or tried to show them why they should vote for or against one of the presidential candidates. Offline participation was calculated as the sum of the nine items (M= 2.5, SD = 1.75).
Chapter 3

RESULTS

Data for this study was collected using Qualtrics software and analyzed through SPSS. Participant names were collected with the information but deleted prior to analysis.

Hypothesis 1 looked at a participant political social media use and their attention to the 2012 presidential election. Social media use was calculated using a measure of items including participant Facebook or Twitter use to: access political, presidential, or campaign information, start or join a political group, reveal a preferred candidate, discover a friend’s preferred candidate, or sign up as a “friend” of a candidate. The results were significant, with a positive and moderately strong relationship between using social media for political purposes and attention to the 2012 election. Specifically, as political social media use increases, so does attention to the election, \( r = 0.44, p < .05 \).

Hypothesis 2 used the political social media use measure to determine its association with offline, in-person political discussion. Hypothesis 2 was supported. There was a positive and moderate relationship between political social media use and in-person political discussion, \( r = 0.28, p < .05 \).

Hypothesis 3a predicted that there would be a relationship between offline participation and information-seeking after seeing an acquaintance post about politics on Facebook. Offline political participation was calculated using a combined measure of Milbrath and Goel (1977) and Hoffman and Thomson’s (2009) participation scales.
The hypothesis was supported. There was a significant, positive, and moderate relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.26, p < .05$.

Hypothesis 3b predicted that there would be a relationship between offline participation and political information-seeking after seeing an official account post about it on Facebook. Like its counterpart, 3b yielded a significant, positive, and moderate relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.38, p < .05$.

Hypothesis 4a tested the relationship between offline participation and political information-seeking after seeing a personal acquaintance post about it on Twitter. The hypothesis was supported, with a significant, positive, and moderate relationship between the two variables, $r = 0.37, p < .05$.

Hypothesis 4b also predicted a relationship between offline participation and political information-seeking after seeing an official account post about it on Twitter and offline participation. The results were significant, with a positive and moderately strong relationship between seeing an official account post about politics on Twitter and offline participation, $r = 0.46, p < .05$.

Discussion

This study sought to enhance what we know today about youth political participation. The 2008 presidential election, which featured more and varied use of social media, had a significant increase in youth voter turnout. It was therefore important to investigate how new and more salient technology played a role in fostering youth participation in the 2012 presidential election. Few studies have analyzed how social media plays a role in young adults’ offline political participation. The present study helps to elucidate not only how Millennials are using new
technology, but how their specific online behaviors impact their actions in the political realm.

Exploratory analyses revealed that there were indeed significant, positive, and moderate-to-strong relationships between social media use and offline political behaviors. As consistent with previous research, (e.g. Xenos and Moy, 2007; Anduiza et al, 2009), the results support Hypothesis 1, that political social media use would be related to attention to the 2012 presidential election. That is, the more a participant uses a Facebook or Twitter account to read about politics, join a political group, interact with friends or followers about favored candidates, or become a friend of a candidate, the more attention he or she is likely to pay to the election. Of course, it may be true that those who interact politically online may be the citizens who are predisposed to high levels of participation. Although these results cannot explain causality, the results add depth to existing evidence of technology’s role in closing the youth participation gap, and suggest positive effects of social media use, as opposed to earlier research citing negative effects of certain types of Internet use (e.g. Shah et al, 2005; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Coleman, Morrison, & Svennevig, 2008).

Hypothesis 2 looked at political discussion, which has been identified as an important precursor to participation (Milbrath & Goel, 1982). The hypothesis investigated the connection between online and offline political dialogue, and was supported by the data. The results show that those who read and post about politics on Facebook and Twitter more frequently are also more likely to talk about politics with others in person. The finding that Internet use can encourage political discussion is aligned with previous studies (e.g. Mossberger et al. 2008; Bimber, 1999; 2003). However, few other studies have tested specific social media behaviors in conjunction
with offline political engagement, especially among Millennials. It is plausible that youths prone to in-person political discourse would naturally use social media as a tool to further the discussion. It may be the case that social media is not actually a force encouraging youth political discussion, but is instead a tool to further it through multiple channels. Either way, the use of social media as a platform for youths to voice their opinions, at minimum, reinforces their existing participation habits and at maximum, can increase their involvement in the political discourse. Thus, the present findings are evidence of social media’s positive role in facilitating political discussion. This is in line with recent research by the Pew Internet & American Life project (Smith, 2013), which found that age was significantly related to various types of political social media use in summer, 2012.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 explored a nascent area in political communication research, the influence of specific types of social media relationships as avenues to information-seeking and participation. Participants were asked how frequently they sought further information after seeing it discussed by a personal acquaintance or friend on Facebook (3a) and Twitter (4a). The relationship between those who sought information after seeing it posted about by friends on social media and offline participation was significant and moderately strong. However, seeking further political information more frequently after seeing an official account (e.g. a candidate page, journalist, or news organization) on Facebook (3b) and Twitter (4b) had a stronger relationship with offline participation. That is, both respondents who sought further political information after seeing a social media friend and an official account post were more likely to participate politically offline. However, the data indicate that official accounts’ political posts are a stronger motivator for further information
seeking. This builds on the Pew finding that young people are significantly more likely to seek information after seeing it on SNSs, by demonstrating the relationship between such information-seeking and offline participation (Smith, 2013). These results yield rich and interesting implications for the future of political social media use.

The results may illustrate social media’s role in establishing credibility and influencing the habits of information-seekers. That is, a person’s or organization’s identity could either motivate a social media consumer to either seek further information, or to disengage from the discussion. It is possible that official accounts, such as elected officials, media organizations, or business elites (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007) could serve as opinion leaders in the social networking sphere. However, social media allows people to become their own opinion leaders within their network of by friends and followers. The two-step flow of communication theory defines an opinion leader as the person within a social network that both seeks and provides information from the media and is more likely to discuss politics interpersonally (Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008). From this perspective, opinion leadership is not defined by official status, but is motivated by personality. According to Shah & Scheufele (2006), opinion leaders are “self-assured, perceiving themselves as intelligent and independent enough to form personal judgments about public issues that they can then share with others (p. 3).” Thought of in this way, the opinion leadership framework does not necessarily explain why the present study found a stronger relationship between seeing official account information posting and seeking further political information. However, opinion leadership can provide context
to what motivates certain Millennials to consume and post political information on social media more than others.

Opinion leaders, or “early adopters” (Shah & Scheufele, 2006, p. 2) are intrinsically motivated by their self-perception as socially innovative and politically informed citizens. Yet opinion leaders also value how they are viewed by others because their role is dependent upon their status within a social group (Rogers, 1995; Summers, 1970). The value placed on peer perception is explained by the self-perception theory, which poses that people form attitudes and beliefs about themselves by deducing the behavior of others (Jackson & Hogg, 2010). In 2006, Kavanaugh et al. conducted a similar study to determine the political role of blog users and defined the most politically and socially active people as “opinion leaders.” According to the authors, these politically active bloggers were using the websites as a tool to both support their own political interests and their influence among their social circles.

However, Facebook and Twitter differ from blogs in the emphasis that the networks place on the number of friends and followers. It is possible that the amount of friends and followers a user has contributes to their sense of confidence in opinion leadership. Perhaps when a person views a profile of someone with a large number of friends, they perceive that their opinion is more highly valued, which could motivate them to explore political information and feel confident in posting about it. Or, perhaps the amount of friends or followers a user has may also grant them more validity and thus elevate them to an opinion leadership role among their social media friends or followers. Although it is difficult to determine causality, it is entirely possible that a higher number of social media followers lends certain users a higher online “net worth,” which could motivate political content postings. As a result, the
political opinion of a user with many followers or friends may be perceived as more legitimate and thus be elevated to a status of opinion leadership.

Individual characteristics as motivators for political social media use also has interesting potential for future political communication research. This study invokes, but does not answer those questions. Rather, the significant relationships found between Millennial technology use and political behavior indicate that these relationships should be further investigated. It may be true that the youths who use social media to further the political discussion are the youths who were prone to participation regardless. However, if, as this study demonstrates, social media and new technology have the potential to further the engagement of the once politically “neglected” youths, then it is an avenue worth further exploring.

Limitations and Future Research

Before concluding, it is necessary to note several limitations related to the data used in the present research. Because the survey sampled college students from only one large, Eastern university, our results cannot be generalized to the greater population. There may be inevitably be differences in technology use and political behavior based on age and region. The survey also had a relatively low response rate and a significantly unequal gender ratio, as males comprised only 27 percent of the sample. Another limitation is that I did not include an option for graduate students to identify their education status. This oversight did not allow the study to account for inherent differences between people of different education levels. Also, the study neglected to utilize a follow-up survey which could have provided more depth of information about respondents, and more accurately gauged their actual offline political behavior such as voting.
An inherent flaw in examining youth technological use is that because the Millennial generation is the most tech-savvy, they are predisposed to higher levels of technological efficacy than the general population. This may have created a ceiling effect on the results, meaning that because youths feel more comfortable using technology they may also have corresponding predetermined political behaviors. An indirect comparison may attribute validity to this limitation. A recent study (Hoffman & Schechter, 2012) used the identical technological efficacy measure among adults and found a mean score of 2.50, in comparison with the present study’s mean score of 4.07. Future research should control for this variable or include it in more complex analyses.

Further, the survey did not include opinion leadership multiple-item self-report scales (e.g. Flynn, et. al, 1996), which would have allowed for an analysis of what role opinion leadership plays in Millennial political social networking. This would enable researchers to discover relationships between high-scoring respondents and their participation habits. Further, including a survey item that ask respondents to quantify their Facebook friends or Twitter followers could allow for an analysis of social media “net worth” in comparison with opinion leadership characteristics and propensity to post online.

This study sought to examine solely youths’ technology use in correlation with their political participation, but a future study could draw from both a student and an adult sample to draw direct comparisons between both. Also, this study did not provide incentives for survey participation. Future researchers could offer incentives relevant to students to improve the response rate. Moreover, because the present results reflect a significant imbalance between male and female respondents, future
researches could provide male-based incentives for survey completion to encourage a more equal participant gender ratio.
Conclusion

This study revealed that youths are indeed taking advantage of recent technology features, which lower the cost of political participation. In the years that precede the 2016 presidential election, it will be interesting to see how further technological integration plays a role in the campaigns. As Millennials slowly begin to replace the older generations, and the middle generations become more familiar with social media use, it is possible that politically active people will use the technology to feel more efficacious, and that even less engaged citizens will be exposed to political information. Future research should continue to observe how youths, and all citizens, use new technological platforms to further their engagement in American political life.
REFERENCES


