

Social Media, Social Capital, and the Civic Participation of College Students

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Abstract

In recent years, social media technology has transformed the ways that Americans interact with each other. Social media usage is particularly high among young adults and college students (Lenhart et al., 2010), and recent research suggests that there is a relationship between social media usage and participation in civic and political activities (e.g., Fenton, 2011; Hampton et al. 2011). Recently, research has also examined the relationship between the Internet (and social media) and social capital (e.g., Shaw et al 2001; Ellison et al, 2007, Valenzuela et al., 2009).

The research presented here assesses the extent to which students at a large, public, Midwestern university utilized social media during the 2010 midterm election year, the types of social media they preferred, their levels of social capital, and any impact these factors had on student political and community participation. With the exception of a weak, marginally significant association between Twitter usage and political participation, social media usage does not appear to be directly associated with traditional forms of student civic participation. However, we did find evidence of an indirect, mediated association between students' social media usage and their civic participation. The importance of the Internet and social media for students appears to lie in its utility as an information gathering tool. Specifically, we found that students who used social media more frequently were more likely to access information about news online, which had a positive impact on levels of civic participation.

Keywords: social media, social capital, civic engagement, political participation

Introduction

In recent years, social media technology has transformed the ways that Americans interact with each other. Social media usage is particularly high among young adults and college students (Lenhart et al., 2010), and recent research suggests that there is a relationship between social media usage and participation in civic and political activities (e.g., Fenton, 2011; Hampton et al 2011). Recent trends suggest that the use of social media technologies, especially among younger adults, will become an increasingly powerful tool to communicate interests and mobilize support for social causes (e.g., the 99 percent movement).

In this sense, social media is transforming the ways people interact with each other, influencing public discourse, and providing new opportunities for participation in political and community affairs. The ubiquity of social media, its rapid rise in usage, and its impact on human behavior and communication make it an area that is ripe for exploration.

With these trends in mind, we were curious to assess the extent to which students at a large, public, Midwestern university utilized social media, the types of social media they preferred, and any impact these factors had on student political and community participation. While the researchers had anecdotal evidence to suggest a relationship between social media usage and civic engagement, this study allowed for the gathering of systematic empirical evidence to support or refute these assumptions.

Below we summarize the literature on recent trends in social media usage, including the demographic characteristics of social media users, the link between social media and political and civic participation, and the links between social media, social capital and civic participation. After we summarize the existing literature we present the results of a study examining the relationship between social media usage and civic participation among college students. We find evidence that social media mainly influences civic and political participation because it provides students with access to news and information, which may raise awareness about issues they are concerned about, and provide them with more opportunities to get involved.

Social Media Usage among Americans

According to a recent Pew study of social media usage in the United States, social media is becoming more popular among Americans. The study reports that

72% of American internet users¹ over the age of 18 use at least one social media site (Brenner and Smith, 2013).

Demographically, younger Internet users are more likely to use social media sites than older Internet users. Nearly nine out of ten (89%) Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 reported using social media. In contrast, only 43% of Internet users over the age of 65 reported using social media. In terms of race/ethnicity, the study found that Hispanics (80%) were more likely to use social media sites than blacks (75%) or whites (70%). The study did not find substantial differences in social media usage across levels of education or income (Brenner and Smith, 2013). In terms of the types of social media sites Americans use, 69% use Facebook (Rainey and Duggan, 2013), 20% use LinkedIn (Duggan & Brenner, 2012), and 18% use Twitter (Brenner and Smith, 2013).

The increasing usage of social media has had a profound impact on American life. Studies have found that social media technology is increasingly being used by people to maintain their social ties, and that Facebook revives “dormant” relationships. The average social media user has closer personal ties and is half as likely to be socially isolated than the average American. Users of the most popular social media site, Facebook, are more trusting than others, and they have stronger relationships than other Americans. In addition, regular Internet users get more support from their social ties, with Facebook users receiving the most support (Hampton et al., 2009; Hampton et al., 2011).

In addition to the ways social media is transforming the nature of social interaction among internet users, it is also transforming the ways they learn about and get involved with issues they care about, and some scholars suggest that social media’s “real potential lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere” (Shirkey, 2011).

Social Media and Political and Nonpolitical Civic Participation

Recent studies have examined whether the Internet and social media usage influences online and traditional (offline) types of civic participation (Dahlgren, 2000; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Pasek et al, 2009). According to a study by Smith et al. (2009), nearly one in five internet users have posted content about political or social issues using social media. That same study found that there were substantial

¹ According to Pew (2013) 85% of Americans over the age of 18 use the internet.

differences in online political and civic behaviors by age, with 37% of internet users aged 18-29 using blogs or social networking sites as a venue for political or civic involvement, compared to 17% of online 30-49 year olds, 12% of 50-64 year olds and 10% of Internet users over 65.

Online political and civic involvement also appears to be related to traditional political activity (e.g., voting, contacting public officials, working on campaigns, participating in boycotts and other forms of political protest) (Vitak et al., 2009) and civic participation (e.g., attending public meetings, voluntarily serving on committees, working on community projects). Smith et al. (2009) found that people who use blogs and social networking sites as an outlet for civic engagement are more active in traditional forms of political and nonpolitical participation than other internet users. In fact, they found that social media users who are politically and civically active online are even more active in traditional forms of civic participation than those who do not use the internet at all. According to the authors:

Compared to those who go online but do not post political or social content or to those who do not go online in the first place, members of this group are much more likely to take part in other civic activities such as joining a political or civic group, contacting a government official or expressing themselves in the media. (p. 7)

Digital technologies, such as e-mail and other types of social media also serve as a way for members of offline political and civic groups to communicate in ways that supplement their face-to-face meetings. Smith et al. (2009) found that just over half of those involved with a community or political group used digital tools such as e-mail and social media to communicate with the other members of the group.

Social media is also influencing participation in political campaigns. Overall, 39% of all American adults took part in some sort of political activity on a social networking site during the 2012 presidential campaign. There has been a large increase in the proportion of social media users who post political news, who friend or follow candidates, and who joined an online group organized around political or social issues. In addition, social media users say their activity on the sites has prompted them to learn more about social or political issues and to take action around those issues (Smith, 2013).

Social Media and Access to Information

Social media is also influencing the way students access information and makes it easier for them to potentially share information with large numbers of people. Recent research shows that Americans are increasingly turning to the Internet for their access to news and information. For example, Rosenstiel et al. (2011) found that 47% of adults use their mobile devices to access local news and information. They also found that there was a large difference in access to information by age, where people younger than 40 tend to access their local news and information online and people older than 40 tend to access their local news and information through newspapers.

With the upsurge in use of social media, there is an interactional exchange component where people access online sites not just to get information, but to disseminate it as well (Lee and Ma, 2012). People are increasingly turning to social media to share information that is important to them. When they share information related to public issues, it raises awareness and encourages others to get actively involved (Feezell et al., 2009; Cohen et al., 2012). The collective sharing of information on political and social issues may result in increases of more traditional forms of civic and political participation (Feezell et al., 2009; Cohen et al., 2012).

Social Capital, Social Media, and Civic Participation

Robert Putnam has linked social capital to civic engagement and political participation (1993; 1995; 2000). He observed a strong empirical relationship between the presence of voluntary associations in communities and the quality of life in those communities. Participation in voluntary associations, he argues, results in individual and collective benefits. He claims that these individual and collective benefits are the direct result of stocks of social capital, which he defines as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000: 19). He found that communities with high levels of social capital had political structures that functioned efficiently, and political elites that were responsive to the needs of their citizens. He also found that the residents of high social capital communities showed higher levels of civic engagement and participation in politics.

Verba et al. (1995) found that participation in voluntary associations contributes to the development of useful civic skills, establishes politically useful social networks, and increases opportunities for recruitment into political activity.

While participation in voluntary nonpolitical associations may not be overtly political, Verba et al. argue that it has important implications for the effectiveness of political action, and for the likelihood of engaging in political activism.

A recurring theme throughout the literature on social capital and civic participation is the importance of trust. Coleman (1988), Putnam (2000), and Uslaner (2005) have all shown that trust is a key component of the structure of social relations that is important for generating social capital. Specifically, they argue that social capital is most effectively utilized when social interactions take place in an environment characterized by mutual trust and norms of reciprocity. Thus, in the social capital literature, trust reflects the belief that there are underlying values common to all members of a society; that we are connected to people who are different from ourselves; and that we have a moral responsibility for their fate (Uslaner, 2002). Thus, trust viewed as a resource that promotes sociability and cooperation among members of a community or social network; two factors that are extremely important for effective civic participation (Putnam, 2000).

Recently, research has examined the relationship between the Internet (and social media) and social capital (e.g., Shah et al. 2001; Ellison et al, 2007, Valenzuela et al., 2009). In addition to the ways social media has led to the structure of Internet users' social networks, it has also been shown to supplement traditional forms of social capital, such as participation and membership in voluntary associations.

In addition to examining the ways that frequency of social media usage and access to information are related to students' political and nonpolitical civic participation, we also examine the role played by student social capital. Specifically, we examine how involvement with on-campus and off-campus voluntary organizations and levels of student trust are associated with their civic participation. Participation in voluntary associations is important for student civic participation because it contributes to the development of useful civic skills, establishes politically useful social networks, and increases opportunities for recruitment into political activity (Verba et al., 1995). Trust is important for student civic participation because it promotes sociability and cooperation among members of a community or social network.

Data and Methods

This study reports the results of a survey completed by 584 undergraduate students at a large, Midwestern university in the fall of 2010, as well as the results of two focus groups conducted in spring 2011. The survey asked questions related to students' social media usage, their access to news and information, their social capital, and their offline and online civic behaviors. Survey questions related to student social media usage included the types of social media that they used, as well as their frequency of usage. Survey questions related to civic behaviors included both online and traditional nonpolitical civic participation, and online and traditional political participation. Detailed information about the variables used in this analysis can be found in Appendix A. Focus group questions were designed to elicit opinions regarding the effects of social media on awareness (e.g., Does the social media make you more informed of community, national and world events?) and activity (e.g., Does the social media increase your civic engagement?).

Student Survey

In the fall of 2010 surveys were sent out via e-mail to all undergraduate students at a large, Midwestern public university. The fact that the data were collected during a non-presidential election year might have an impact on responses for student political participation, especially as it relates to electoral activity, such as registering to vote, voting, or working on campaigns. For example, the overall youth turnout (ages 18-29) for the 2010 midterm election was 24% in 2010², which was much lower than the 45% that voted in the 2012 presidential election³. Of the 17,159 surveys that were sent, 584 were completed and submitted, a response rate of 3.4%. Admittedly, the response rate is low, which is a weakness of this study, and females were overrepresented among respondents relative to their proportion of the university's undergraduate population (61% in our sample, compared to 56% in the overall population). The racial characteristics of respondents closely resembled the racial characteristics of the university's undergraduate population (87% white, 3% African-American, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 2% other). On balance, while the sample size is relatively large by social science standards, the results presented below should be interpreted cautiously since the response rate was low, and there may be some error in the reported statistics that is a result of

² <http://www.civicyouth.org/official-youth-turnout-rate-in-2010-was-24/>

³ <http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/#6>

selection bias among survey respondents (for example, tech savvy students may have been more likely to participate in the survey than students who were less comfortable with e-mail or the Internet). The data from the focus groups provided a more in depth examination of students’ attitudes and largely confirmed the general trend suggested by the quantitative data.

Table 1-Descriptive Statistics

<u>Demographics</u>	
Gender	
Male	61.0%
Female	39.0%
Age (mean)	22.8 (6.7)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	87.1%
Black	2.8%
Hispanic	3.2%
Asian	5.2%
Other	1.6%
<u>Type of Social Media Usage</u>	
Facebook (weekly or more)	81.8%
Twitter (weekly or more)	12.6%
YouTube (weekly or more)	47.3%

<u>Social Interaction</u>	
SM to connect with family	11.1%
SM to connect with friends	52.9%
<u>Access to Information</u>	
Newspaper (often/always)	29.2%
Television (often/always)	28.0%
Online (often/always)	49.3%
<u>Social Capital</u>	
Most people can be trusted	54.8%
Belong to community org	61.1%
Belong to campus org	73.3%
<u>Civic Participation</u>	
Nonpolitical (one or more)	87.7%
Political scale (one or more)	62.3%

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of our sample. The survey revealed some interesting trends in social media usage by students. Specifically, the results of the survey showed that social media technology usage is ubiquitous among the students in our sample, with 82% regularly using Facebook, 47% regularly using YouTube, and 13% regularly using Twitter. We also found that the majority of students used social media as the primary way they kept in touch with their friends (53%). In contrast, only about one-in-ten used social media as the primary way they kept in touch with their family. Students also reported that they accessed news and information using the Internet and social media more frequently than they did through television or newspapers. Almost half (49.3%) of the students reported

accessing news and information online often or always. Traditional media outlets were much less popular, with 29% reporting that they read newspapers regularly, and 28% reporting that they frequently get their news from local television.

In terms of student social capital, more than half responded that most people can be trusted, 61% belong to at least one community organization, and 73% reported belonging to at least one campus organization.

Students were also highly engaged in both political and nonpolitical civic activities. Nearly 80% of students reported that they participated in one or more nonpolitical activity, and 62% reported that they had participated in at least one political activity.

Methods

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was used to examine the relationship between social media usage and political and nonpolitical civic engagement. For each dependent variable there were a series of four regression models run. The first model regressed the dependent variable on the social media variables. The second model regressed the dependent variable on the social media variables and the access to information variables. The third model regressed the dependent variable on the social media variables, the access to information variables, and the social capital variables. The fourth model regressed the dependent variable on all of the variables, including the demographic control variables.

Student Focus Groups

Two student focus groups were conducted in spring 2011. Students were recruited to participate in the focus groups from the original 584 students who were surveyed in the fall of 2010. The first focus group was composed of 7 students and the second of 6 students. The groups were a mixture of different academic levels (though most were juniors or seniors), mostly female (F=11, M=2), traditional students (11 versus 2), and Caucasian (11 versus 2). This demographic data (other than sex and class rank) was determined through observation rather than data supplied by the participants. The focus groups were small since they were conducted toward the end of the semester, which is a busy time for students, and may have affected their willingness to participate.

The text of these two focus groups was transcribed and subjected to content analysis to assess the attitudes of students on a variety of questions and to group their responses into emergent categories. Rudimentary content analysis had several steps. Independently, reviewers examined responses to a particular open-ended question and generated categories to capture the full array of responses. Together, the reviewers arrived at consensus on categories developed for those responses. The reviewers then independently reviewed responses and recorded it as a hit in each category in which it fit (many responses fell into more than one category). The reviewers then discussed the distribution (percentages) of responses falling into a particular category. A 100% inter-rater agreement rate means that both reviewers arrived at the same distribution. If not, then responses had to be examined and reviewers either agreed on a category placement or agreed to disagree (for further discussion of content analysis in qualitative research, see Glaser and Strauss, 1967 and Berg, 1989). In the current study, there was 100% inter-rater agreement on those questions where there was a tabulation of affirmative or negative responses. Responses to open-ended questions were independently coded for substance and placement in a category or multiple categories (e.g., helping others, awareness of community events) and then compared resulting in an inter-rater agreement rate of 98%.

Results

Nonpolitical Civic Participation

Table 2 - Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients for Models Predicting Traditional Nonpolitical Civic Participation

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>
Constant	1.35*** (.154)	1.17*** (.156)	.873*** (.178)	.921** (.301)
Facebook	.082 [†] (.044)	.064 (.043)	.028 (.045)	.031 (.049)
YouTube	.064	.031	.058	.072

	(.043)	(.043)	(.043)	(.046)
Twitter	.054	.034	-.018	-.031
	(.040)	(.039)	(.040)	(.041)
Contact friends via SM	-.047	-.007	.035	.019
	(.107)	(.104)	.110	(.113)
Contact family via SM	-.255	-.273	-.078	-.050
	(.156)	(.153)	(.153)	(.160)
Info newspaper (often/always)	--	.359**	.275*	.264*
		(.106)	(.108)	(.113)
Info online (often/always)	--	.356***	.332***	.314**
		(.099)	(.102)	(.105)
Info TV (often/always)	--	.070	.110	.048
		(.107)	(.107)	(.047)
Most people can be trusted	--	--	-.157	-.137
			(.097)	(.101)
Membership in voluntary organizations	--	--	.174***	.173***
			(.038)	(.039)
Membership in student organizations	--	--	.122***	.127***
			(.035)	(.037)
Nonwhite	--	--	--	.026
				(.162)
Age	--	--	--	-.002
				(.008)

Female	--	--	--	-.079 (.116)
R ²	.02	.07	.19	.18

* p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; †p<.10

Table 2 presents the results of four OLS regression models predicting student traditional nonpolitical civic participation. In Model 1, the civic participation scale is regressed on the social media usage variables. Of the social media variables, the coefficient for frequency of use of Facebook was marginally significant ($p < .10$).

In Model 2, the access to information variables were added. Of the access to information variables, there was a significant positive association between students’ accessing information through newspapers and their nonpolitical civic participation, and a significant positive association between students’ accessing information online and their nonpolitical civic participation. Controlling for the access to information variables reduces the strength of the coefficient for frequency of Facebook usage, making it insignificant. This suggests that there is an indirect effect of student Facebook usage on their nonpolitical civic participation that operates through their greater likelihood of accessing news and information online.

In Model 3, the social capital variables were added. Student membership in off-campus voluntary organizations and student membership in on-campus organizations both had a significant positive association with their nonpolitical civic participation. Student trust was not significantly associated with their nonpolitical civic participation. The addition of the social capital variables weakened the association between students’ using newspapers to get their information and their nonpolitical civic participation, but it did not substantially alter the positive association between accessing information online and their nonpolitical civic participation.

In Model 4 the control variables of race, age, and gender were included. None of the control variables had a statistically significant association with students’ traditional forms of nonpolitical civic participation.

Political Participation*Table 3 - Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients for Models Predicting Traditional Student Political Participation*

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>	<u>(SE)</u>
Constant	2.04*** (.115)	1.77*** (.246)	1.58*** (.294)	.030 (.474)
Facebook	.029 (.070)	.010 (.068)	.011 (.074)	.045 (.076)
YouTube	.011 (.068)	-.024 (.067)	.020 (.072)	.077 (.073)
Twitter	.219*** (.062)	.201*** (.061)	.151* (.066)	.111 [†] (.065)
Contact friends via SM	-.084 (.168)	-.034 (.164)	.043 (.181)	-.008 (.178)
Contact family via SM	-.453 [†] (.245)	-.447 [†] (.240)	-.351 (.253)	-.364 (.252)
Info newspaper (often/always)	--	.755*** (.167)	.603** (.180)	.466** (.179)
Info online (often/always)	--	.302 [†] (.157)	.151* (.066)	.404** (.166)
Info TV (often/always)	--	.052 (.168)	-.009 (.176)	-.054 (.175)

Most people can be trusted	--	--	-.248 (.161)	-.164 (.159)
Membership in voluntary organizations	--	--	.228*** (.062)	.186** (.062)
Membership in student organizations	--	--	-.056 (.058)	.016 (.058)
Nonwhite	--	--	--	-.494 [†] (.256)
Age	--	--	--	.063*** (.012)
Female	--	--	--	-.145 (.183)
R ²	.02	.07	.08	.15

* p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; [†]p<.10

Table 3 presents the results of four OLS regression models predicting the scale for traditional forms of student political activism. In Model 1, the political activism scale is regressed on the social media usage variables. Of the social media usage variables, only the coefficient for frequency of use of Twitter was significant.

In Model 2, the access to information variables were added. Of the access to information variables, there was a significant positive association between accessing information through newspapers and student political activism, as well as a marginally significant association between accessing information online. Controlling for the access to information variables reduced the strength and significance of the coefficient for Twitter from .20 to .15 (p<.05).

In Model 3, the social capital variables were added. Membership in off-campus voluntary organizations had a significant positive association with student political activism, suggesting that student involvement in nonpolitical activities may lead to participation in political activities, a finding that is supported in the literature (e.g., Verba et al., 1995). Controlling for social capital does not affect the positive association between accessing news and information online or through newspapers. Interestingly, controlling for the social capital variables reduced the strength and significance of the coefficient for Twitter from .20 ($p < .001$) to .15 ($p < .05$).

In Model 4 the control variables for race, age, and gender were included. There is a significant association between age and political activism, with older students being more active. The fact that older students were more likely to be politically active in a non-Presidential election year than younger students has implications for the ways students use social media to get involved in politics, given that older students were less likely to use social media. This potentially explains the consistent positive association between accessing information from newspapers and political participations, a relationship that was weakened with the addition of the control variables. It may also explain why adding the control variables strengthened the positive association between students' accessing information online and their political participation. There was also a marginally significant association between race and political activism, with nonwhites having lower levels of political activism than whites.

Student Focus Groups

During the two focus groups, we asked ten questions that provided useful information for qualitative analysis. Results from three questions most relevant to this article are reported below identifying the main categories of responses that surfaced for each question, the frequency of responses falling into those categories, and exemplars for each.

When asked if their social media usage made them more informed about community, national, and world events, eleven (85%) of the students agreed (two did not respond to this question). Of those responding, eight (62%) mentioned that it kept them informed of events on and off campus (more of a localized awareness), and seven (54%) stated that this was their primary source for world news (non-localized information).

“I get sent emails so that is the way that I find out about things that are going on in the community. Locally, I hear about a lot of what’s going on through Facebook.”

“I get a lot of my news through Yahoo and other online sources.”

When asked if their social media usage engaged them more in community, national, and world events, the students’ responses focused more on the community level when responding. Eleven (85%) agreed that the social media engaged them more, one disagreed, and one did not answer. The responses indicated that the social media provided students with reminders of events and ways to help (n=11, 85%), and directly encouraged participation in activities (n=10, 77%).

“You can get things from the university website, through email, through a text, so there are many venues for you to get the information and it just presents more opportunities.”

“Social media is a thing you can interact with, not like a flyer. So if you have questions you can ask and get answers. When there’s an event going on, like a charity, and your friend tells you about it through a message, you’re more likely to go. If a group of people I know are going, I’m more likely to go there myself.”

We asked participants if the social media increased their civic engagement and twelve (92%) agreed that it did. When asked why, six students (46%) mentioned that it helped to raise their awareness of issues leading them to get involved as the quotes below illustrate.

“I think awareness would increase participation. If you increase awareness through the social media and if it seems like the cool thing to do then people are more apt to be engaged.”

“It would be helpful because we would see the information and say, ‘Oh yeah, there’s something going on now.’ They would be more aware of it and more interested in being a part of it.”

Discussion

According to our results, with the exception of a weak, marginally significant association between Twitter usage and political participation, social media usage does not appear to be directly associated with traditional forms of student political and nonpolitical civic participation.

However, we did find evidence of an indirect, mediated association between students' social media usage and their civic participation. The importance of the Internet and social media for students appears to lie in its utility as an information-gathering tool. Specifically, we found that students who used social media more frequently were more likely to access information about news online, which had a positive impact on levels of civic participation. Our results suggest that where students get their information from is significantly associated with both political and nonpolitical civic participation. For nonpolitical civic participation, people who regularly get their information online were engaged in more traditional nonpolitical civic activities than those who did not regularly get their information online. The same is true for political participation, but the effect is somewhat weaker. The weaker effect of students' accessing information online on political participation appears to be the result of the significant association between age and political participation, because older students were more likely to be politically active and less likely to use social media.

More traditional forms of social capital, particularly membership in on-campus organizations and in community voluntary organizations, were consistently positively related to traditional political and nonpolitical civic participation, which makes sense in the context of prior research suggesting that "social media tools are not a replacement for real-world action but a way to coordinate it" (Shirkey, 2011, p. 6).

Our study provides evidence that the Internet and social media are useful for traditional forms of political and nonpolitical civic participation to the extent that they provide students with access to information and opportunities for involvement that they do not get to the same extent through newspapers or television news. However, more traditional forms of social capital, such as membership in voluntary associations still appear the most significant for purposes of civic participation.

The data from the focus groups offers additional support for the quantitative results since the vast majority of students indicated that they are connected through social media. A student captured the power of social media by saying:

"The Internet gives you more than words. It gives you pictures, voice, interaction between your friends. That's related to civic engagement because it's shared with your friends. If you are told several times, I'd

check what's going on there. It spreads so fast and is a convenient way to inform a large group of people in a short time.”

In terms of civic engagement, the majority of students agreed that their use of social media made them more informed of community, national and world events; though most of the awareness was focused on the local community level. However, just over half indicated a dependence on the social media for getting news about the world at large. Most of the students agreed that the social media made them more engaged through reminders about events (85%) and encouraged participation in those events (though most examples of participation were local). The vast majority (92%) agreed that the social media could increase civic engagement primarily through raising the awareness of others about social problems and what could be done.

Related to this idea, the overwhelming majority of students (92%) thought they should be involved in volunteerism citing the benefits of being of service to the community and learning from that experience. This is reinforced by students interpreting political activity as doing something in the community to make it a better place. The participants demonstrated a high degree of civic efficacy since all of them felt they could have a positive impact on the community through spreading information about social issues and getting directly involved.

Conclusion

Social media is changing society and patterns of social interaction. Its usage is increasing across all age groups, particularly among college-aged individuals. Given this significant trend, questions arise as to how this technology will affect the civic and political engagement of current and future generations. It appears that social media is here to stay, and that it is dramatically changing the way information is accessed and disseminated. Information that once was solely within the domain of the “specialist” or “expert” is now at the fingertips of millions of Americans. This study suggests that social media has become an integral part of everyday life for college students. They use it to access and share information, to establish and maintain a larger number of social ties than was previously possible, and to voice their opinions on issues that are important to them. Indeed, it appears that the rise in popularity of social media has already started to redefine the nature of social interaction, and has caused social scientists to revisit what exactly is perceived as a “social tie” (e.g., is a “friend” on Facebook really a friend?). In terms of social

capital, social media has the capacity to bring people together who might never have met by more “traditional” modes of communication. This, in turn, may facilitate networking through which individuals identify common ground and coalesce to work together to promote a shared social cause. If changing a social problem requires that people first come to recognize it as a problem, then the social media could be the engine to raise general awareness of social issues and mobilize a generation to transform society as we know it.

The data collected and analyzed for this study offers support for the idea that the utilization of social media to get information is significantly associated with engagement in political and non-political civic activity. However, the results should be viewed with caution due to the low sample size, and questions on the representativeness of the sample. Future research should seek to reduce these limitations. Also, since this was a cross sectional study, we are only getting a slice of the perceptions of students at a given point of time. Longitudinal studies of social media usage would help with discussions of causality and would help to show how the integration of social media and mobile technologies influences behavior throughout the life course. Future research should also develop more specific questions on how students use social media for civic participation, including a focus on information sharing, as well as a comparison of college students to other populations.

However, despite the limitations of our study, the trend suggested by the results is clear and compelling. A significant strength of this study is the benefit of a mixed methods approach, utilizing a new survey instrument combined with student focus groups.

Given the trends identified in this and other studies, it is expected that social media will continue to have a significant impact on the social dynamics of the political and non-political spheres of everyday life. Furthermore, these are changes that are likely to affect interactions across the life course and, rather than remaining an age cohort phenomena, will shape the social experience of future generations (Carpini, 2000; Xenos & Foot, 2008). As a ubiquitous phenomenon, social media has the potential to fundamentally alter (for good or ill) the nature of social interactions and the social environment in which we work and play.

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Bradley Fisher is a professor in Psychology and Gerontology at Missouri State University and Coordinator of the Gerontology Program. He has published one book and over two dozen scholarly articles on topics ranging from the self-concept in later life, factors associated with aging well, efficacy and empowerment among older adults, and innovative teaching techniques. Dr. Fisher views civic engagement as an integral part of his academic role and has served on numerous advisory boards and task forces in the community. He has been the recipient of the University Foundation Award for Service and the Faculty Excellence in Community Service Award.



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